Wild West Stories

And COMPLETE Novel MAGAZINE

10¢

DECEMBER

KILLER RANGE
Another
FLASH STEELE
NOVEL
BY
LAWRENCE A. KEATING
AND OTHERS

DO YOU WANT THIS COVER PAINTING?
SEE PAGE 127

Fight colds where they start • *in the throat* —with LISTERINE

LISTERINE COUGH DROPS

A new, finer cough drop, medicated for quick relief of throat tickle, coughs, irritations.

10c

Safe antiseptic kills millions of germs associated with sore throat and colds

DON'T go on suffering with heavy colds that undermine your strength. Don't put up with painful sore throats. Go after these conditions in the sensible, scientific way.

Kills germs in the throat

Listerine attacks the germs associated with colds and sore throat. Almost immediately after gargling it kills literally millions of them in throat and mouth, before they have a chance to enter the body.

Scientific tests in 1930-31, 1931-32 and 1934 have shown this astounding result: that those who gargled with Listerine twice a day or oftener caught about half as many colds as non-garglers.

Moreover, when Listerine users did catch cold, their colds were milder and of shorter duration than those of non-users.

At the first sign of a cold

Start using Listerine today. As you can see, it is an intelligent precaution against cold infections. If you feel your throat getting sore, or a cold coming on, use Listerine more frequently—every 3 hours is recommended. Lambert Pharmacal Company, St. Louis, Missouri.

—and see how it relieves Sore Throat

Be a Radio Expert

Many make $30 $50 $75 a week

I will train you at home for many Good Spare Time and Full Time Radio Jobs

J. E. Smith, Pres. Nat'l Radio Institute, the man who has directed the Home Study training of more men for the Radio industry than any other man in America.

SET SERVICING

Spare time set servicing pays many N. R. I. men $5, $10, $15 a week extra. Full time men make as much as $30, $50, $75 a week.

BROADCASTING STATIONS

Employ managers, engineers, operators, installation and maintenance men for jobs paying up to $5,000 a year.

LOUD SPEAKER APPARATUS

Installation and service work is another growing, money-making field for trained Radio men.

TELEVISION

The coming field of many great opportunities is covered by my Course.

AIRCRAFT RADIO

Radio is making flying safer. Radio operators employed through Civil Service Commission earn $1,800 to $2,500 a year.

RADIO FACTORIES

Employ testers, inspectors, foremen, engineers, servicemen for jobs paying up to $6,000 a year.

IF YOU are dissatisfied with your present job; if you are struggling along in a rut with little or no prospect of anything better than a skinny pay envelope—Clip the Coupon NOW. Get my BIG FREE BOOK on the opportunities in Radio. Read how quickly you can learn at home in your spare time to be a Radio Expert—what good jobs my graduates have been getting—real jobs with real futures.

REAL OPPORTUNITIES AHEAD IN RADIO FOR TRAINED MEN

It's hard to find a field with more opportunities awaiting the trained man. Why in 1934 the Radio industry sold $235,000,000 worth of sets and parts! Over 300,000 people worked in the industry! It's a gigantic business, even in the poor business years. And look what's ahead! Millions of sets are going out of date annually. 20,000,000 sets are now in operation on which about $80,000,000 are spent EACH YEAR for repairs, servicing, new tubes, etc. Broadcasting stations pay their employees (exclusive of artists) approximately $23,000,000 a year. Advertisers pay 600 great Broadcasting Stations over $75,000,000 a year for Radio time and talent. A few hundred jobs that paid $30, $50, $75 a week less than 20 years ago have grown to thousands. These figures are so big that they're hard to grasp. Yet they're all TRUE! Here's a new industry that has grown to be a commercial giant! No wonder business leaders predict a brilliant future for the great and growing Radio industry.

GET INTO THIS FIELD WITH A FUTURE

There's opportunity for you in Radio. Its future is certain. Television, short waves, police Radio, automobile Radio, midget sets, loud speaker systems, aviation Radio—in every branch, developments and improvements are taking place. Here is a real future for hundreds of men who really know Radio. Get the training that opens the road to good pay and success! Send the coupon now and get full particulars on how easy and interesting I make learning at home. Read the letters from graduates who are today earning good money in this fascinating industry.

MANY MAKE $5, $10, $15 A WEEK EXTRA IN SPARE TIME WHILE LEARNING

Every neighborhood can use a good part time serviceman. The day you enroll I start sending you Extra Money Job Sheets which quickly show you how to do Radio repair jobs common in most neighborhoods. Throughout your Training, I send you information for servicing popular makes of sets! I give you plans and ideas that have made good spare time money—$200 to $1,000 a year for hundreds of fellows. My Training is famous as "the Course that pays for itself."

MONEY BACK IF NOT SATISFIED

I am so sure that N. R. I. can train you at home satisfactorily that I will agree in writing to refund every penny of your tuition if you are not satisfied with my Lesson and Instruction Service upon graduation. You'll get a copy of this Agreement with my book.

64-PAGE BOOK OF FACTS FREE

Get your copy today. It's free to any ambitious fellow over 15 years old. It tells you about Radio's spare time and full time job opportunities; it tells you all about my Course; what others who have taken it are doing and earning. Find out what Radio offers YOU without the slightest obligation. MAIL THE COUPON in an envelope, or paste it on a 1c post card NOW.

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 5NM
Washington, D. C.

This Coupon is Good for . . . One FREE Copy of My Book

J. E. SMITH, President
National Radio Institute, Dept. 5NM, Washington, D. C.

Dear Mr. Smith: Without obligating me, send your free book about spare time and full time Radio opportunities and how I can train for them at home in my spare time. (*Please write plainly.*)

Name.....*Age*.....

Address.....

City.....*State*.....

Wild West Stories and COMPLETE Novel MAGAZINE

Edited by FREDERICK GARDENER

December, 1935 No. 124

Contents

KILLER RANGE *Another Flash Steele Novel*
by LAWRENCE A. KEATING 8

Indian Creek was fired by a feud between the eternal Western Enemies—the Stockmen and the Sheepherders—and Steele had to settle it. And the worst of it was that neither side trusted him, believing him a member of the opposition. It makes a grand, thrilling story. Don't forget! Only in this magazine can you read about Flash Steele, superman ranger!

RED RODEO by JAMES P. OLSEN 57

A sinister influence followed the rodeo. Accidents, robberies and killings happened on the fair grounds—and they all pointed one way. But Rainy Riordan took the sand out of his eyes and finally saw straight.

THE LAUGHING SENOR by CLAUDE RISTER 84

This masked Robin Hood of the West stole only to avenge a wrong but there were others who took advantage of the awe with which he was held and committed all sorts of devilish crimes hoping to pin the blame on him.

THE ROUND-UP Conducted by
"COTEAU" GENE STEBBINS 120

Come on, you fellas and gals! Back up yore foreman and register in his Pen Pal Corral. He's got a speshul message for yuh in this issue.

HOW TO WIN THE ORIGINAL PAINTING REPRODUCED ON THE COVER 127

If you like the cover—and it is a good one—and would like to have it for your own, the editor tells you how you may get it. Easy, too.

10 cents a copy

$1.20 per year ($1.70 in foreign countries) $3.70 in Canada (including duty)

Published Monthly by
TECK PUBLICATIONS, INC.,
Office of publication, 29 WORTHINGTON STREET, SPRINGFIELD, MASS.
EDITORIAL AND EXECUTIVE OFFICES, 461 EIGHTH AVE., NEW YORK, N. Y.
LEE ELLMAKER, Pres. and Treas. B. HOLCEPL, Sec'y.

Application for transfer of second-class entry to the postoffice at Springfield, Mass., pending. All manuscripts sent at author's risk. Return postage must be included.

I'll send you YOUR CHOICE of these BIG BARGAINS at my risk. — L.W. Sweet Jr.

Send me $1 — that's all

I'LL GIVE YOU 10 DAYS TRIAL and 10 MONTHS TO PAY

I'LL REFUND YOUR MONEY IF NOT SATISFIED

$19.75

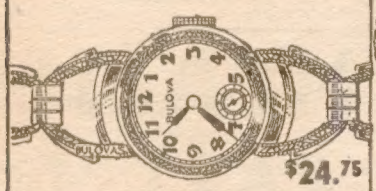
1842—Tiny baguette watch with 2 diamonds; chromium plated; 7 jewels. **$1.90 a month**

$24.75

R6—Bulova's new round watch. 10k white rolled gold plate case; 7 jewels. **$2.38 a month**

$24.75

R1—Bulova's Miss America—a dainty baguette with 7 jewel movement. **$2.38 a month**



$24.75

M1—Bulova Commodore—a round watch for men with a 15 jewel movement. **$2.38 a month**

$15.95

2142—Kent round watch. Modern dial. 7 jewels. Smart link bracelet. **$1.50 a month**

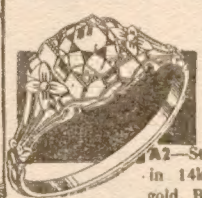
$14.75

2126—Smart watch for men. Numerals on case in enamel background. 7 jewels. **$1.38 a month**

SWORN PERFECT DIAMOND

$50.00

A305—A sworn perfect diamond selected by my diamond expert and me. You're sure it's perfect because the Federal Trade Commission rules that diamonds described as such must be without spots, flaws or carbon. Furthermore, you get a sworn affidavit with each purchase. This beautiful solitaire is in an attractive 14k white gold mounting. **$4.70 a month**



LOVELY SOLITAIRE

$21.95

A2—Stunning floral design in 14k natural and white gold. Brilliant diamond. **$2.10 a month**

$29.95

A102—Attractive white gold engagement ring with neat arrangement of 5 high quality diamonds. **$2.90 a month**

$24.50

B6—Three brilliant diamonds and 2 simulated blue sapphires in 14k white gold dinner ring. **$2.35 a month**

My father helped thousands to the happiness that comes with the possession of a diamond or watch. Now I'll help you. Let me send your choice of these special bargains that I've selected for your approval and 10-day free trial. It's simple—here's how you do it.

WHAT YOU DO: Put a dollar bill in an envelope with your name, address and number of the article wanted. Tell me your age (must be over 20), occupation employer and other facts about yourself. I'll hold this information confidential and no direct inquiries will be made.

WHAT I'LL DO: I'll open a 10-month charge account for you and send your selection for approval and 10-day free trial. If you're not convinced that the bargain is all I say about it, send it back and your dollar will be refunded immediately. If satisfied, you pay the balance in 10 small monthly payments you'll never miss.

$16.95

1176—10k yellow gold initial ring for men. Diamond and initials mounted on black onyx. **$1.50 a month**

FREE TO ADULTS—32 page catalog of other big bargains in diamonds, watches, jewelry, silverware—all 10 months to pay. Send for it.

L.W. Sweet Inc.

MAIL ORDER DIVISION of FINLAY STRAUS

Dept. 765 M 1670 BROADWAY·NEW YORK

Train for ELECTRICITY IN 12 WEEKS AT COYNE

The great Coyne Shops in Chicago have a world-wide reputation for training ambitious fellows for this big-pay field in only 12 weeks. Then help you by giving you lifetime employment service. By my new plan YOU can take advantage of their wonderful method of learning-by-doing NOW.

SEND TODAY FOR DETAILS OF MY "Pay-Tuition-After-Graduation" Plan

Get training in 90 days on **real electrical machinery. Send the coupon today.** If you are short of money I'll send you all details of my finance plan. If accepted, you won't have to start paying tuition until **five months from the date you start school,** and then you'll have **18 months** to complete your payments. Send for **Big Free** illustrated **Book** telling all about COYNE and how **many earn while learning** and training you can get there **without book study** or useless theory.

H. C. Lewis

COYNE ELECTRICAL SCHOOL
500 S. Paulina Street, Dept. 95-66, Chicago, Illinois

MR. H. C. LEWIS, President
Dept. 95-66, 500 S. Paulina St., Chicago, Ill.
Send BIG FREE Illustrated Book on ELECTRICITY and details of your "Pay-Tuition-After-Graduation" Plan.

NAME ..... AGE....

ADDRESS.....

CITY..... STATE.....

How To Secure A Government Position

Why worry about strikes, layoffs, hard times? Train now for a Government job. Many examinations expected! Increased salaries, steady work, travel, good pay. Let me help you become a Railway Postal Clerk, Post Office Clerk, City Mail Carrier, Rural Carrier—or help you get into any other Government job you want. I was a Secretary Examiner of Civil Service Commission for 8 years. Have helped thousands.

Now FREE My 32-page book tells about these jobs—and how I help to qualify you to get one. Send the coupon for your copy TODAY.

A. R. Patterson, Civil Service Expert
PATTERSON SCHOOL, 6512 Case Bldg., Rochester, N. Y.
Please send me, without obligation, your free book "How to Secure a Government Position."
Name.....
Address.....

FOREST JOBS

available at $125-$175 per month, steady. Cabin. Hunt, trap, patrol. Qualify at once.

Get details immediately

Rayson Service Bureau, B-52, Denver, Colo. © 1935

NO JOKE TO BE DEAF

—Every deaf person knows that—

Mr. Way made himself hear his watch tick after being deaf for twenty-five years, with his Artificial Ear Drums. He wore them day and night. They stopped his head noises. They are invisible and comfortable, no wires or batteries. Write for TRUE STORY. Also booklet on Deafness.

Artificial Ear Drum

THE WAY COMPANY
737 Hofmann Bldg. Detroit, Michigan

NEW GLAND HEALTH FOR MEN PAST 40!

Scientist's Discovery Re-stimulates Important Prostate Gland

Used by Anyone at Home—

Brings Amazing Relief from Getting Up Nights and Other Weakening Symptoms

WOULD you like to again enjoy life with youthful strength and health? Now science has made an amazing discovery for you—a new home treatment for the prostate gland—a most essential gland in men.

Do you suffer night risings—pains in back, legs and feet—fits of weakness and discouragement? These symptoms are traced in untold thousands of men past 40 to decline of this vital prostate gland. Now comes Thermalaid. No drugs, diets or exercises. Safe and easy as washing your face. Endorsed and used by many doctors. Used by over 100,000 men; thousands praise it in glowing reports. Sent on trial with this understanding: If you don't feel years younger in 7 days, you pay nothing. Write for offer and daring free

Confidential Book FREE

book of facts for men past 40. **W. J. Kirk, Pres., The Electro Thermal Co., 4896 Morris Ave., Steubenville, Ohio.**

If you live west of the Rockies, address The Electro Thermal Co., 500 Wm. Fox Bldg., Dept. 48-D, Los Angeles, Calif. In Canada address The Electro Thermal Co., Desk 48-D, 53 Yonge St., Toronto, Ont., Canada.

W. J. KIRK, Pres., The Electro Thermal Co., 4896 Morris Ave., Steubenville, Ohio.
Without obligation to me, please send me copy of your confidential book "Why Many Men Are Old at 40," with details of your simple home treatment for prostate gland weakness and 7-day Trial Offer.

Name.....

Address.....

City..... State.....

DON CORRADO ROMANO
founder of
ROMANO'S COIN SHOP

OLD MONEY WANTED

WE PAY THE WORLD'S HIGHEST PRICES

UP TO $5000.00 EACH

Amazing Profits For Those Who Know OLD MONEY!

Big Cash Premiums
FOR HUNDREDS OF COINS NOW CIRCULATING

There are literally thousands of old coins and bills that we want at once and for which we will pay big cash premiums. Many of these coins are now passing from hand to hand in circulation. Today or tomorrow a valuable coin may come into your possession. Watch your change. Know what to look for.
Don't sell your coins, encased postage stamps, or paper money to any other dealer until you have first seen the prices that we will pay for them.

WE WILL PAY FOR 1909 CENTS UP TO $10.00 EACH

1860 Cents $50.00 — Cents of 1861, 1864, 1865, 1869, 1870, 1881, 1890, $20.00 each—Half Cents $250.00—Large Copper Cents $2000.00—Flying Eagle Cents $20.00—Half Dimes $150.00—20c Pieces $100.00—25c before 1873, $300.00—50c before 1879, $750.00—Silver Dollars before 1874, $2500.00 — Trade Dollars $250.00 — Gold Dollars $1000.00 — $2.50 Gold Pieces before 1876, $600.00—$3 Gold Pieces $1000.00—$5 Gold Pieces before 1888, $5000.00 — $10 Gold Pieces before 1908, $150.00 — Commemorative Half Dollars $6.00—Commemorative Gold Coins $115.00.

PAPER MONEY — Fractional Currency $26.00. Confederate Bills $15.00. Encased Postage Stamps $12.00.

FOREIGN COINS—Certain Copper or Silver Coins $15.00. Gold Coins $150.00, etc.

Don't Wait! Send Dime Today for Our Large Illustrated List Before Sending Coins

Address your envelope to:

ROMANO'S COIN SHOP
Dept. 545 **Springfield, Mass.**

CUT FILL OUT AND MAIL TODAY !

ROMANO'S COIN SHOP, 545
Springfield, Mass.

Gentlemen: Please send me your large illustrated list for which I enclose 10c in cash carefully wrapped.
(Please print plainly.)

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____

TIRE PRICES CUT!

on GOOD YEAR GOODRICH-FIRESTONE FISK-U·S· AND OTHER FAMOUS MAKES

Here are the outstanding standard brand tire bargains of the year, repaired by the improved "criss-cross" method and by skilled workmen. You take no risk when you buy from York, the old reliable tire house with 19 years of service in this field. Thousands of tire users throughout the U. S. declare our tires give them LONG, SATISFACTORY SERVICE. Buy Now—at these reduced prices and SAVE MONEY.

$1.85 29x4.40-21

$2.15 28x4.75-19

We Receive Hundreds of letters like this "I bought a 34x4½ of you 2 years ago and it is on my truck yet and good for another year."—John H. Silverthorn, Mich.

Don't Delay — Order Today!

BALLOON TIRES

Size Rim	Tires	Tubes
29x4.40-21	$1.85	$0.85
29x4.50-20	2.00	.85
30x4.50-21	2.10	.85
28x4.75-19	2.15	.95
29x4.75-20	2.20	.95
29x5.00-19	2.55	1.05
30x5.00-20	2.55	1.05
5.25-17	2.60	1.15
28x5.25-18	2.60	1.15
29x5.25-19	2.60	1.15
30x5.25-20	2.60	1.15
31x5.25-21	2.90	1.15
5.50-17	2.95	1.15
28x5.50-18	2.95	1.15
29x5.50-19	2.95	1.15
6.00-17	3.10	1.15
30x6.00-18	3.10	1.15
31x6.00-19	3.10	1.15
32x6.00-20	3.10	1.25
33x6.00-21	3.25	1.25
32x6.50-20	3.35	1.35
6.00-16	2.65	1.45

REGULAR CORD TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x3½	$1.85	$0.75
31x4	2.65	.85
32x4	2.65	.85
33x4	2.65	.85
34x4	2.90	.85
32x4½	3.00	1.15

HEAVY DUTY TRUCK TIRES

(High Pressure)

Size	Tires	Tubes
30x5	$3.70	$1.95
33x5	3.75	1.45
34x5	3.95	2.00
32x6	7.25	2.75
36x6	9.00	3.95

TRUCK BALLOON TIRES

Size	Tires	Tubes
6.00-20	$3.25	$1.65
6.50-20	3.60	1.95
7.00-20	4.65	2.95

Size	Tires	Tubes
34x4½	$3.10	$1.15
30x5	3.30	1.35
33x5	3.40	1.45
35x5	3.55	1.55
34x7	$9.95	$3.25
38x7	9.95	3.95
36x8	10.65	3.95
40x8	12.65	4.15

Size	Tires	Tubes
7.50-20	$5.40	3.75
8.25-20	7.60	$4.95
9.00-20	9.40	5.65
9.75-20	12.95	6.45

ALL OTHER SIZES

DEALERS WANTED

SEND ONLY $1.00 DEPOSIT on each tire ordered. ($4.00 on each Truck Tire.) We ship balance C. O. D. Deduct **5 per cent** if cash is sent in full with order. To fill order promptly we may substitute brands if necessary. ALL TUBES BRAND NEW—GUARANTEED—HEAVY GAUGE CIRCULAR MOLDED. Guard against price advances. Order Now. **We agree to replace at half price any tire failing to give 9 months' service.**

YORK TIRE & RUBBER CO., Dept. 3643
3855-59 Cottage Grove Ave. Chicago, Ill.

PILES DON'T BE CUT

Until You Try This Wonderful Treatment

for pile suffering. If you have piles in any form write for a FREE sample of Page's Pile Tablets and you will bless the day that you read this. Write today. E. R. Page Co., 488-A3 Page Bldg., Marshall, Mich.

WANTED!
ORIGINAL POEMS, SONGS

for immediate consideration

M. M. M. PUBLISHERS

DEPT. NS Studio Bldg.

PORTLAND, ORE.

EARN GOOD PAY RAFTING

If you're earnest and apt:—Now get ready for a BETTER job and MORE PAY! I'll teach you drafting by the PRACTICAL METHOD at home. I furnish all tools and drawing table. Earn while you learn in your spare time. No previous experience needed. FREE Employment Service! Thousands of successful students since 1900. *And* new opportunities in drafting. Prepare now! Write *Today* for FREE BOOK on Draftsmanship. No obligations.

FREE BOOK

ENGINEER DOBE, Div. 30-39 LIBERTYVILLE, ILL.

HAVE A NEW SKIN!

IN 3 DAYS

Outer Skin Blemishes All Gone!

Visible Pimples and Blackheads, Freckles, Ugly Large Pores and Age Lines Disappear!

READ FREE GIFT

You thought this impossible, but now you can have a clear, blemish-free, new outer skin IN 3 DAYS. Look clean, healthy, years younger and beautiful this new, harmless, economical way.

It is all explained in a new free treatise called

"BEAUTIFUL NEW SKIN IN 3 DAYS"

which is being mailed absolutely free to readers of this magazine. So worry no more over your humiliating skin and complexion or signs of aging if your outer skin looks soiled and worn. Simply send your name and address to **MARVO BEAUTY LABORATORIES**, Dept. 68-A, No. 1790 Broadway, New York, N. Y., and you will receive this new treatise by return mail absolutely free. If pleased tell friends.

STOP Your Rupture Worries!

G. E. Brooks, Inventor

Why worry and suffer with that rupture any longer? Learn about my perfected invention. It has brought ease, comfort and happiness to thousands by assisting in relieving and curing many cases of reducible hernia. It has Automatic Air Cushions which **bind and draw the broken parts together as you would a broken limb.** No obnoxious springs or pads. No salves or plasters. Durable, cheap. **Sent on trial** to prove it. Beware of imitations. Never sold in stores nor by agents. Write today for full information sent free in plain, sealed envelope.

H. C. BROOKS, 174B State St., Marshall, Michigan

TOBACCO HABIT

BANISHED

FOR THOUSANDS OF MEN

QUICK, SURE, LASTING RESULTS

in most cases **Tobacco Redeemer** relieves craving for tobacco completely in a very few days. An absolutely safe, dependable, and thoroughly reliable treatment. No matter how long the habit, or in what form used, all craving for tobacco usually vanishes when this pleasant, inexpensive treatment is used according to simple directions. The treatment has helped thousands and should help you. Your money returned without argument or question if not satisfied. Write for free explanatory booklet and proof of what **Tobacco Redeemer** has done for men addicted to the tobacco habit. Send post card or letter today.

NEWELL PHARMACAL CO.

Dept. 600 Clayton Station St. Louis, Mo.

BE A RAILWAY TRAFFIC INSPECTOR

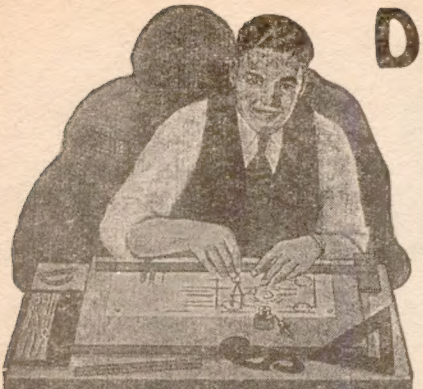
Prepare Yourself for an Interesting, Well-Paid Job

ACTIVE, RELIABLE MEN—19 to 60—are in demand as *Railway and Bus Passenger Traffic Inspectors*. Start at up to $135 per month, plus expenses, and advance rapidly with experience. Simple, home-study course quickly trains you and upon completion we will place you, *or refund tuition*. Interesting, healthful work; travel if you like. Free Booklet.

STANDARD BUSINESS TRAINING INSTITUTE
Div. 1312 Buffalo, N. Y.

Drafting and Design

Offers Ambitious Young Men A Real Opportunity



As a starting job for the man who wants to get ahead in industry, Drafting offers more possibilities for rapid promotion than almost any other job. The Draftsman's work brings him into direct contact with all new developments.

Many of the highest-paid Architects, Engineers, Designers, and Superintendents got their start at the Drafting table, where they gained knowledge and experience that soon fitted them for bigger things.

Why are Draftsmen among the first to be hired—the last to be laid off? Why are there thousands of Draftsmen on the payrolls of architects and builders—consulting engineers—engineering and construction firms—mills and factories—railroad and street car systems—telephone and telegraph companies—electric light and power companies—shipbuilders—surveying and mapping companies—plumbing supply houses—electric wiring contractors—city sewer and water departments—subdivision development companies, etc.?

Because the Draftsman is the connecting link between engineer and mechanic. Every new machine or building—every improvement in a tool or machine part—starts on the Drafting table. On paper, the Draftsman works out the new idea in the lines and figures which speak the language common to engineers and mechanics; and his drawings and blueprints give the engineer's instructions to the skilled workers who do the job.

Draftsmen in Wide Demand

And Draftsmen are equally necessary in many other less familiar lines—thousands are employed by patent attorneys—cemeteries—golf course designers—testing laboratories—map makers—museums—educational institutions—city park systems—landscape gardeners—publishers of technical books—city planners—model makers—industrial research associations—furniture makers—stone cutters—large buildings, etc. In fact, there is hardly a business or industry of any size that does not employ Draftsmen.

Well-Paid Line with Real Future

Drafting is well-paid, interesting, necessary, high-grade office work along engineering lines—covers all types of construction and manufacturing—carried on in light, airy working quarters—brings you in touch with important men of the organization—and, because of the training and experience it gives, leads direct to very desirable positions in Engineering, Building, and Manufacturing. Write *today* for full information about the opportunities open to you. No obligation.

American School

Dept. DD-939 Drexel Avenue at 58th Street Chicago, Ill.

BE TALL

Your Height increased in 14 days, or money back. The amazing Stebbing System increases height and brings new "pep" and energy. Valuable Health Course and "Success and Popularity" Course included FREE with system. Sent complete for $2.00 or send 3¢ for Free convincing Book with Guarantee and Testimonials showing 3 to 5 inches gained. WRITE NOW TO:—

STEBBING SYSTEM

Dept. F G—25. FOREST HILLS, NEW YORK

FOLLOW THIS MAN

Secret Service Operator No. 38 is on the job! Running down dangerous Counterfeit Gang. Telltale finger prints in murdered girl's room.

Free *The Confidential Report Operator No. 38 made to his chief. Write for it.*

Earn a Regular Monthly Salary

YOU can become a Finger Print Expert at home, in your spare time, at small cost. Write for confidential full report and details. Literature will NOT be sent to boys under 17 years of age.

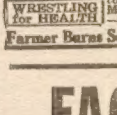
INSTITUTE OF APPLIED SCIENCE
1920 Sunnyside Ave.
Dept. 1569 Chicago, Ill.

Try This On Your Hair 15 Days

Let Your Mirror Prove Results. Your hair need not thin out, nor need you become bald. This Different Method stops thinning out of hair, lifeless hair, itching, dandruff, threatened or increasing baldness by strengthening, prolonging the life of hair for men and women. Send your name now before it's too late for **free** 15-day test offer.

JUEL DENN, 207 N. Michigan Ave., Dept. A-93, Chicago, Illinois

Wrestling Book FREE



Learn to be an **expert wrestler.** Know scientific wrestling, self-defense, and Jiu-Jitsu. Develop a splendid physique, and health. Lessons prepared by famous WORLD'S CHAMPIONS

Frank Gotch and Farmer Burns

Easily, quickly learned at HOME. Be strong, be skillful, learn the **science,** the **tricks,** the SECRETS. Handle big men with ease. The all-around health exercise. A WONDERFUL opportunity for boys and also for business men!—Boys: Grow strong! Men: Gain in health! Write TODAY for splendid FREE BOOK—tells all about this 26 year old school. State your AGE.

Farmer Burns School of Wrestling 3039 Elwood Bldg., Omaha, Neb.

$158.00 MONTH Railway Postal Clerks

First year regular.
Men 18 to 35.
Many Other Government Jobs.

COUPON

FRANKLIN INSTITUTE
Dept. C 268, Rochester, N. Y.

Sirs: Rush without charge (1) 32-page book describing U. S. Government jobs. (2) Send list of Government jobs. (3) Tell me how to get one of these jobs.

Name.....

Address.....

FACTORY TO YOU

LATEST MODEL REMINGTON TYPEWRITERS

10-Day Free Trial Offer

10¢ A DAY

BRAND NEW, latest model Remington Portable for only 10¢ a day! Amazingly low price direct from the factory. Every essential feature of large office typewriters—standard 4-row keyboard, standard width carriage, margin release, back space, automatic ribbon reverse. Act now. Remington Rand Inc., Dept. 147-12, 205 East 42nd Street, New York, N. Y.

Killer Range

Flash Steele, in Another Thrilling Adventure as the Governor's Special Representative, is Called upon to Settle a Feud Between those Eternal Enemies — the Cowmen and the Sheep Herders

By
LAWRENCE
A.
KEATING.

CHAPTER I

SHEEPMEN'S RUSE

THE stagecoach wheeled around the hairpin turn of the narrow clay road cut through the foothills of the Captian Mountains. It was inky black tonight and muggy after the rain, the humidity bringing out pungent odors of pine gum and wild flowers. The stage creaked as it took the straightening highway, wheels spurting dust, the four-horse team hurrying toward their oats at Indian Creek, thirteen miles from the railroad.

The driver's lash crackled in the night and the horses jogged faster. Inside the coach two men passengers and a girl swayed and jolted in silence,

each immersed in his thoughts. Lips pursed, Special Ranger Flash Steele thrust a hand under his corduroy jacket to shift the heavy rubber-butted sixgun holstered on his hip. His fingers roved to the fourth cartridge from the buckle of his loop belt. That cartridge, a blank, contained Governor Maridale's letter written on onionskin paper. As he wore no uniform or badge, the letter was Steele's authority and his only identification as a ranger. He worked undercover, reporting solely to the Governor.

Sheep and cattle trouble awaited him in Indian Creek with the count thus far one man murdered and half a dozen wounded. Thought of it made Steele raise his steeple-crown sombrero to rake lean fingers through his shock of tow-colored hair. Range war blazed where he was going—blazed with all the traditional hate of cowmen for the raisers of woollies.

And it was Steele's job somehow to bring peace.

"That's goin' to be plenty tough to do!" He scowled, shaking his head. "Bein' a ranger, I can't take either side. Sheepmen are as much citizens as cattlemen."

The stout individual riding backward opposite him shifted weight. The fellow looked increasingly gloomy as he jerked his Stetson lower over small, mean eyes and a round face pitted from smallpox. He had not uttered a word since they left Junction and there was something furtive, sneaky about him that Steele did not like.

He glanced at the young girl at his side, judging her to be near his own age of nineteen. Blue-eyed, she was tanned as from range life and had hair like ripe wheat peeping from under her saucy little hat. She was fidgety, Steele had noted, as if burdened with some anxiety. Nervously she crumpled a letter in her hands, then smoothed it as if she wanted to re-read the message by the flickering rays of a small kerosene lamp bracketed on the rear wall of the coach. But crumpling the missive again, she sighed and stared unseeingly out of the window.

Steele wondered about her. She was pretty. He wondered about the gent opposite with his air of gloomy concealment. He wondered again about this sheep and cattle war, whether—

"Stick up your hands! Quick!"

A sixgun leaped as if by magic from under the stout man's coat, its dime-size hole threatening Steele's chest. He dropped a startled ejaculation at the same instant the girl gasped. The Colt wavered, easily covering the two of them. The man flipped his Stetson back, his close-set eyes gleaming like the eyes of a snake ready to strike.

"I said get 'em up! Both of you!"

His blunt-ended finger tightened over the trigger. Astonishment still gripped Steele. Then wrath blazed in him, and while slowly, reluctantly he raised his palms shoulder-high he groped for some opening to spring catlike at the other.

BUT readiness to kill lurked in those gleaming eyes. The men were only two or three feet apart. The coach rolled on as if the whiskered driver on the high spring seat suspected nothing.

"Wh-what does this mean?" the girl cried indignantly. "I haven't anything valuable!"

The dangerous eyes remained on Steele. "Shove your hands higher, you! An' keep 'em that way for a mile yet," he snarled. "You'll find out what it means, Miss Ruth Walton, daughter o' the king-bee cow raiser. You'll find out damned soon!"

His gaze swerved to her. And like a spring released Steele's hundred and seventy pounds snapped at the man. His hands knocked the forty-five swishing to the floor. He slammed hard against the fellow, chest to chest, got a hand wrapped over the Colt barrel, and drove a terrific uppercut at the pocked, flabby jaw.

The sixgun exploded. Its flame warmed Steele's leg through his corduroy trouser. The bullet bit into soft pine flooring. The men strained and swayed. They half-rose, locked in a fierce clinch as they battled for possession of the Colt.

A yell floated from the driver out front. The grab of brakes hurled both combatants into the forward seat. They rose again, muscles bulging, hands twisting to break the sixgun free, their faces mask-like with rage and growing moist in the feeble lamplight as beads of perspiration stood out at their effort.

Steele yanked his right hand from the other's hold. Still gripping the gun with the vise-like fingers of his left, he doubled his blunt fist and bashed it at the blond stubbled face. Again and again he struck, until curses gurgled in the stickup's throat and teeth cracked at the smash of his knuckles. Then with a mighty jerk Steele twisted the gun loose—but savagely his antagonist pitched forward and wrapped both arms around him in a bear-like hug. The fellow fumbled at the ranger's own gun. He was getting it out of the low-cut holster . . .

A terrific lurch of the stage hurled them into the girl. All three went down. She uttered a muffled cry. The men wrenched apart and the pock-faced gent swayed away from Steele. He had the ranger's gun. There was a split-second of aiming. Then two shots blasted as one inside the box-like coach, pounding heavily on the ears.

A streak of pain like a needle scratch crossed Steele's jaw. There was a drooling snarl; the tough twitched, then collapsed into the front seat with a bullet in his shoulder.

Steele realized that the stagecoach had come to an abrupt halt. Through swirling powdersmoke he groped to snap open the door but unexpectedly it swung wide. He missed the metal step and all but fell into the road, his head butting the chest of a tall, gangling individual. A claw-like hand grabbed his shoulder and jerked him straight. In a flash Steele realized that it was not the driver he faced, and that the highway was filled with armed men.

"Take him, boys!"

Two of them sprang at Steele. He remembered the holdup's words about waiting for the coach to go a mile farther, and realized that the fellow was part of this gang. There was anxiety in Steele's mind for the girl, whom he knew had been close behind him in dismounting from the coach. With a sudden twist he broke loose. Lifting the forty-five they had not discovered in his hand, he clipped the chin of the nearest man, then swung at the other. Someone leaped on him from behind, straddling his back.

The force of it pulled Steele down in the dust. Someone stepped close and yanked the weapon from his fist. Another man knelt and jammed the cool muzzle of a Colt hard against his temple.

"Don't move!"

Death lay behind that rasped-out warning. He obeyed it. Road dust spurted into his face as men trotted this way and that. There must be six or eight members of the gang, and Steele saw they all carried six-shooters and that several gripped shotguns

and carbines. As the gun withdrew a few inches from his temple the ranger crawled to sitting position. Finally he got to his feet, still slightly dazed. His eyes encountered a bulky form in the fringe of weeds at the highway edge. It did not move.

His heart became leaden. Steele knew it was the veteran stage driver who lay there, his long yellow whiskers spewing into the dust. Standing beside him a gaunt-faced man whom someone had addressed as Turner issued crisp, curt orders. A lantern came near in the hand of one of the holdups and Steele saw that Bill Barrows' face had been almost blown to pulp by the heavy discharge of a shotgun.

IT sickened him, roused new indignation that pounded through his veins like fire. Turning, Steele discovered Ruth Walton a few feet away struggling in the grip of a big-chested giant. She squirmed, kicked, and bit at him with all the vigor of her slim body. But her captor only laughed tauntingly, clutching her harder, forcing her to arm's length while she winced at his talon-like fingers gouging her arms.

"Come on, boys. We can't hang around," Turner snapped. He glanced down at the dead man. "He would fight! Where's Scar Dillon?"

"Here he is, Dick. That hellion put a slug in his shoulder so Scar ain't gonna be much use to us."

"Help him in the stage, Arizona. Look here, girl," he addressed Ruth Walton, "you better behave or we're liable to handle you a lot rougher. Savvy that? Put her—"

"You murderers! Killers!" she flared. "You killed Bill Barrows and—"

Air gushed from her lips as her captor suddenly squeezed his arm around her waist, lifted and carried her kicking toward the front of the coach. Steele, waiting hawk-like for an opening, was about to smash at the face of his nearest guard. But the leader stepped close to him, lifting his lantern in one hand for a look at Steele, alertly covering him with his gun in the other.

"Who are you?"

He gave his name shortly. The other leaned. "Cattleman?"

"No. Who're you?"

It brought a grudging smirk. The fellow was not bad looking, a man of forty, tall and stringily built. There was a note of kindness in his eyes even while he chopped off menacing words. "I'm a sheepman, pardner. So are all these here gents. We're fightin' for our rights, if you want to know, and we mean to have 'em! Where you heading?"

"Indian Creek. I've got business there."

Turner's chuckle was echoed by guffaws from men standing near. "Business?" a runtish individual jeered. "You betcha he's got business in the Creek, hey boys? Sheep business!"

The tall man's eyes narrowed. "You got a lot more business there than you think, Mister Iron, or Tin—whatever your name is. Steele. Damn important business, you and that cat of a girl. Fleck, crawl up on the coach roof. Take a shotgun. We'll hand these two up. You cover 'em and we'll start.

One of the men ascended with monkey-like agility to the driver's seat of the stage, then crawled back onto the roof and lay on his stomach amidst luggage and boxes. His shotgun was passed up to him. With both her arms pinned Ruth Walton was lifted off her feet by the giant. He

swung and all but threw her to the footboard. Panting and choking back her anger the girl crawled quickly to the spring seat.

Then ready hands ushered Steele beside the iron step. Guns jabbed his back. "Git up there!"

Hot refusal crowded to his lips—but it was no good to invite sudden death. These men, the ranger saw clearly, were bent on a grim errand connected with sheep. It appeared that in some way Steele and Ruth Walton were to serve as their pawns. To attempt more fight would be foolhardy just now. There was not one chance in a hundred that he could break away, dive into the underbrush lining the road, and escape.

And if he should succeed, what about the girl?

IN a way Steele felt responsible for her welfare. Certainly there was no one else present to look out for her. He gritted his teeth, grabbed the edge of the driver's seat and climbed to the girl's side. Someone flung him the reins, but a man in the road still held the horses lest he try to drive away. He glanced around, his eyes going frosty at sight of Fleck lying on his stomach on the coach roof. His evil-snouted shotgun was aimed directly at Steele from only a yard or two away.

"Climb in, boys!" Dick Turner called. "Now Fleck, it's up to you to watch that pair real close that they don't pull any tricks. At the littlest wrong move, shoot! We ain't out to kill but we ain't goin' to have this fall through, or Jeff Caulson'll likely swing from a cottonwood at dawn. Steele, you use your head if you want to keep it. *Comprend?*"

The ranger made no reply. With a rumble of comments and curses the sheepmen crowded inside the coach. The fellow holding the horses joined them. Finally the two doors slammed. Fleck spoke in a peculiar wheezing voice.

"Drive on, Mister Steele. We're headin' for Indian Creek!"

There was no alternative. He drew the whip from its socket and lifted the reins. The four heavy horses pushed into their collars and the big stage groaned and strained as it swung down the highway. The horses broke into an eager run, whirling northwest as before down the brown ribbon of clay road.

It gave one a queer sensation to feel the menace of that double-barrel shotgun so close behind him. Unarmed, Steele and the girl were helpless, trapped under the twin black muzzles that waited to blaze murder at the slightest hint of trickery.

Ruth Walton edged closer to Steele. "No talkin'!" Fleck wheezed quickly. "You two are like to git your heads blowed off if you try anythin'!"

It brought a shudder from the girl. While they traversed another mile she sat motionless as a statue. Steele saw that her face was pale, her eyes glowing, lips quivering with anxiety. She still wore the saucy little hat, slanted rakishly back on her head since her courageous struggle with the black bearded sheepman.

He risked a low question. "What's their game?"

"We mustn't take them into town!" Ruth whispered back. "It will mean more killings. We—just *can't* take them in!"

Steele listened for angry comment from Fleck. But the grind of wheels, the throb of hoofs, and the mumbling that came from eight men packed inside the stage seemed to drown their guarded talk. "I'm a stranger hereabouts. Tell me all you know."

"Yes. Oh, and you'll help? You'll try?" She leaned slightly for an intent scrutiny of his face. Ruth straightened again, breathing hurriedly. "I—I know you will. I trust you.

"Listen: there are cowboys posted all around Indian Creek tonight. The ranchers are half expecting a raid. That's why these sheepmen captured the stage. They're going to make us drive them right past the guards and into the heart of town. No one will suspect anything. The stage always stops at the Friendship Saloon and the jail is next door. No one will know until they jump out—"

Fleck moved with a rustling sound. When he did not speak the girl rushed on:

"I've been away visiting. My father is Fred Walton. He owns a big cattle outfit, the 7-W. The sheepmen are trying to seize valuable range, and that's how the trouble broke out. I came home from Denver and Bill Barrows—"

Her voice broke at mention of the dead stage driver. "Bill," she continued bravely, "brought me a letter at Junction. It was from Father, and he said I must remain in Junction and not come home yet. I made Bill tell me why. It's because yesterday afternoon the cattlemen captured Jeff Caulson. He's the leader of the sheep crowd, along with this Dick Turner. And the ranchers c-captured Jerry Fernvale too."

Again there was a catch in her voice. "Fernvale's a friend of yours?"

"Yes." She kept twisting her hands nervously. "He runs the Loop-Cross. Father doesn't—I mean he always liked Jerry. But they caught him with Caulson. And they're both charged with murdering Steve Price, a cattleman. Everyone thinks Jerry is a traitor to his kind, that he sides with the sheepmen. Don't you see?" she begged. "They're planning to lynch Jerry and Caulson at dawn!"

Steele suppressed an exclamation. "What else? Quick!"

"Well, father's opposed to that, Barrows told me. But there isn't proof enough to convict the men, so people mean to lynch them. The county's on fire, almost. These sheepmen must have learned about the lynching, and they want to rescue Caulson and Jerry tonight. It means more killing. And we're driving the sheepmen into town, helping them. It's our fault if there's a terrible fight!"

"What are you two gassin' about?" Fleck snarled suddenly.

THEY relapsed into silence. The stagecoach wheeled on at a fast pace, going down a slight incline to open prairie that rolled away in the dark. Awed by the responsibility suddenly thrust upon him, the ranger felt a chill crawl up his spine. The girl at his side was in love with young Fernvale: that was why she had disobeyed her father's order to remain in Junction. Formerly approving Jerry, Ruth's parent now despised him for betraying ranchers to those intent on bringing woolies to crop bunchgrass so short that steers could exist no longer in Indian County.

And with Caulson, the sheep leader in jail, lynching impended, and since Caulson's friends could not break through the vigilantes' patrol of the town, they had craftily decided to ride in unsuspected in the coach.

Steele, a state ranger, was driving sheepmen to a new, bloody clash with the raisers of steers in Indian County.

As the girl talked his brain had skipped ahead. He thought of jerking the four-horse team off the road to wreck the coach. But troubledly he

shook his head. He was ready and eager to take that gamble for himself —but there was Ruth Walton. Suppose she was injured in the crash, maimed for life?

He could not deliberately risk her life as he would his own. Besides, there was no ditch beside the road. The stage might fail to upset. It was a well balanced vehicle and had a short turning radius. Scowling, he rejected that plan as not feasible. But there must be some way to foil those eight heavily armed men under the roof of the creaking, swaying coach.

There had to be!

He watched the horses running eagerly toward their oats. Of a sudden Ruth Walton's gasp made him look up and stare where she stared. Steele's pulse skipped beats, then raced faster than before. Some two miles ahead and beyond a slight rise showed yellow pinpoints of light that swam steadily closer.

They were the lights of Indian Creek.

A sense of reckless determination gripped him. Flash Steele waited. Then covertly he passed the heavy leather reins to the hands of the girl. "You drive," he whispered. "Don't turn around or say anything. Just drive!"

Again he waited. Fleck, according to his calculation, lay about a yard and a half behind him. Steele ventured to turn and sighted the guard still flat on his stomach and chest, the shotgun barrels resting over his forearm.

"Is that Indian Creek ahead?"

"What'd you think it was, Denver?"

"Well, I kind of figured maybe—"

With all the spring of his slim six-foot body he rose on the footboard, pivoted, and dove at Fleck with the speed of an ocelot. Steele landed half atop the man and his weapon, half on the rooftop. It was a desperate gamble he took, challenging death itself. But his jerk whipped the shotgun from Fleck's grasp. His left fist whizzed at that long oval countenance faintly seen under the floppy brim of the sombrero.

But his blow missed. Incredibly, Fleck was no longer there! He came lunging at Steele from one side. His arm swept down and a metal-bound sixgun butt thudded dully on the ranger's skull.

Steele's knees bent under him. He had the sensation of diving as a hawk dives from a dizzy height into a silent, sunny canyon in the hills. His muscles went watery. Red and blue specks danced before his eyes and there was a loud roaring in his ears. Vaguely as he crumpled, Steele comprehended the adroitness of the man Fleck.

He must have overheard the talk between Ruth Walton and Flash. He had even guessed the daring thing Steele intended in a last effort to prevent the load of militant sheepmen from invading Indian Creek. For mere display Fleck had let his shotgun be snatched from his grasp; he had ducked sideways, then clubbed savagely with his forty-five reversed. And he had got his man.

"Drive on!" Fleck wheezed at the girl. "Or you'll get the same darn medicine he got!"

CHAPTER II

INDIAN CREEK

THERE was sweat oozing from his every pore as Steele opened his eyes. For a moment he could not see, could not guess where he was. He only knew that a nausea receded from his system with slow reluctance. And that blood from a

scalp wound trickled warmly down his temple and cheek.

Then he remembered. He tried to move a hand but was struck with new dismay. He was roped hand and foot. The stagecoach lumbered on but it was slowing now. He heard the tense voice of Ruth Walton as she spoke to the horses. And he realized that he still lay atop the coach with Fleck crouching coolly, grimly at his side.

Fleck leaned. "I could have killed you, easy," he notified in his scratchy tones. "An' if you make any noise, mister, I might have to yet. We sheepmen are fightin' for our rights and we'll have 'em!" He added triumphantly: "We're in town, Steele!"

Flash started. Twisting his head he saw clapboard and falsefronted buildings swim past. The main street was dark save for yellow light through the hazy windows of stores and drinking places. The velvety dust crunched under its steel tires as the stage rolled toward the two story Friendship Saloon next the low, oblong adobe jail.

"Pull up, gal!"

Ruth Walton drew her breath fearsomely. "Pull up, darn you!" Fleck barked.

The horses drew to a halt beside the long hitchrail. Desperately Steele threshed and strained at his bonds, but to no avail. The riata only gouged like a blunt knife-blade into the flesh of his wrists. The tough riding boots protected his ankles but he could not move his feet. Ordering Ruth to stay where she was, the guard climbed to earth. A man silhouetted against the lights of the Friendship Saloon spoke from the sidewalk.

"Late, ain't you, Barrows?"

"Nope," Fleck returned cheerfully. "Not too late, I guess. Seen any sheepmen?"

The local man squirted tobacco juice into the road. "They couldn't get in town with a can opener. We got cowpunchers ridin' herd on this place tonight. Figured them stinkin' woollie raisers might try to spoil our little necktie party at dawn. You know, young Fernvale and that Caulson. They—"

"Seth! Seth!" Ruth blurted out. "They're gunmen inside!"

Fleck whirled as if he would shoot her. Instead he sprang to the coach door and twisted its handle. "Come on!" he yelled. "Pile out!"

Gritting his teeth in futile rage at his helplessness Steele heard grunts and exclamations, heard the opposite door snap open. "What's the—" the Indian Creek citizen began.

His cry was drowned in a gunshot. The man staggered clutching his hip. "Help!" he bawled. "Sheep! *Sheep!*"

Then he staggered and sat down hard on the plank sidewalk. He shouted again at the top of his lungs, and began to drag himself to safety. Another gun roared. It whisked the man's hat off. The next instant Fleck and two sheepmen ducked under the hitchrail. But as they straightened several forms burst through the batwing doors of the saloon. Questions, cries, and ejaculations were drowned in the explosion of sixguns.

The battle was on.

Fleck and his companions retreated hastily. The sheepmen crouched beside the coach intermittently sending lead slugs at the saloon entrance. Dick Turner dashed around the other side of the stage. He spied men rushing from another drinking place, then from two more down the street.

"Boys!" Turner appealed. He fired. "Somebody over here!"

His gun cracked again. There came answering explosions from the cow-

boys and grim-faced ranchers across the street. Bullets thudded into the wood of the stage, whistled close over its roof. Steele, threshing this way and that, only succeeded in cutting the bonds deeper into his wrists. The horses pranced frightenedly and Ruth Walton, just starting back toward Steele, turned to snatch up the reins.

During a pause of shots a man groaned as he fell: "I—I got it!"

The half-light made accurate shooting difficult. Cowboys dashed out the rear of the Friendship and came along its sides toward the street. Thus far the sheepmen were forced to stay close beside the coach. Of a sudden Dick Turner dashed in front of the horses. "Get to the jail!" he shouted. "Come on!"

They started en masse. But a fusillade of lead from shotguns and forty-fives made them waver then turn back. The sheepmen threw themselves flat in the road, remarkably cool, intent on picking off their enemies and for the moment, balked of their plan.

MEN and yet more men appeared from buildings up and down the street. Watching tensely, Steele loosed an ejaculation when a flying slug thudded into a suitcase close to his head. The next moment he heard an anxious cry. It was Ruth scrambling over the coach roof, her face drawn and pale, her lips a dark curve above the firm dimpled chin.

"My knife!" Steele panted. "On the right side!"

She knelt and plunged her hand into the pocket of his corduory trousers. Snatching the knife out she fumbled to get it open, then began to saw vigorously at his wrist bonds. The moment of waiting seemed hours. There was a lull in the firing—but then it blazed anew. And from the north end of the street came the thunder of racing horses, the yells of yet more men speeding to join the cowboys.

"Hold 'em! Don't give way!" Turner shouted grittily. He sighted at a dark form and clenched his trigger once—twice. The response was a howl as the man stumbled and went down. "They'll be comin', boys! They'll be here any second!" he cried.

A rain of bullets from his companions scattered the knot of horsemen. Swiftly Steele guessed that they were the punchers who had been on guard. Attracted by the shots and cries, they had left their posts . . .

"It's cut!" Ruth tore at the wrappings and in a moment his hands came free. Steele sat up and began to work at his ankles. As he ripped the lass-rope off there was a new thunder of pounding hoofs. He glanced up, turned to look elsewhere, and heard Ruth's half-audible cry.

"Here come more sheepmen!"

The defenders of the stage heard and glimpsed their confederates at the same instant. Their yells of defiance rang above the crackle of sporadic shots. The cowboys were dismounted now and running from shadow to shadow, four or five of them on either side of the street. The sheepmen swung from their saddles.

"Dutch!" Steele heard. "Take them hosses back!"

They dashed to their friends. Now the shooting redoubled. At a command from Turner his followers rose as one man to their feet. They started at a run for the jail shooting as they went.

Steele was swinging over the baggage rail of the stage. He let go and dropped to the road with force that stung his feet. Just as he was turning away he glimpsed a form toppling the way he had come. Steele caught the plucky girl in his arms, the force of

her fall almost throwing both into the dust.

But he set her down gently, swiftly. "Get inside! In a store—saloon—anywhere! Hide!"

He turned to go but she seized his arm. "No! I—I'm coming. Jerry Fernvale might be—"

He lost the rest of her words as they started to duck under the hitchrail. The sheepmen and the ranchers' force had collided in front on the jail and now it was a mad hand-to-hand tussle with grunts, kicks, flying fists and gunbutts, slashes of fire as weapons exploded.

A man rose as out of nowhere to block Steele's path. It was someone he did not know, and he could not tell whether the fellow sided with sheep or beef. But he saw the smoking Colt raise, saw a lean finger pressed to the trigger. There was death ready to leap from that black hole . . . Instant death!

"Sheriff!" Ruth cried. "Sheriff Roddy!"

Steele knocked the gun aside. He struck the lawman a glancing blow to the head that reeled his antagonist. But quick as a cat Roddy regained balance. He was swinging around when a new burst of shots came from the jail only ten yards away.

A bullet struck the sheriff in the chest. Roddy jerked sideways with a queer muffled sound. Then he fell with a low thud to the plank walk. And lay still.

Steele poised, his breath whisked away. Rage blazed in him at the chance killing of the lawman. A dark form separated from the milling, clubbing, shooting throng to rush at them, and instinctively Flash stopped to seize Roddy's weapon from his nerveless hand. As he straightened the fellow coming on shot twice. Ruth Walton made a low sound of protest as she hurtled back against the hitchrail with force that almost knocked the breath from her lungs.

Steele's rage trebled. He faced a two-gun man, tall, and fierce looking in the swift glance the ranger had. He blazed away again—but too late this time. Steele's shot struck him in the leg and he howled mightily.

FLASH turned to find the girl. For an instant he could not locate her; then he saw Ruth Walton slumped down on the walk. The queer attitude of her churned something inside him, and stooping, he caught her up in his arms. He rushed up the parapet of the Friendship Saloon and through the batwing doors. As he settled his burden gently on the long plank bar on which half-empty beer glasses still were scattered about, a head and shoulders lifted in the bartender's place.

The men's eyes struck. In one hand the red-haired individual gripped a canvas sack that clinked with metal money. In his other he had a gun. He had just rifled the yawning cash drawer.

He lifted his arm to shoot Steele. Their weapons slashed fire, and a lock of Ruth Walton's wheat-hued hair snipped away. Steele's bullet took the fellow through the throat. He dropped like a log.

It left a bad flavor in the ranger's mouth. He found no zest in killing any man. But he knew that he had trapped a thief looting the till of the Friendship Saloon while its owner was abroad battling as his judgment directed.

Ruth, he saw, had fainted. But his hurried scrutiny showed only a bloody place at the curve of her neck and shoulder. It was a shallow flesh wound and should not be serious. She would

be safe here, and he had work to do, work of pressing importance.

Turning, he noted a yellow, pinched face behind an upset table. In two strides Steele crossed the width of the room and sank powerful fingers into the man's shoulder. "Get a doctor, quick!"

"I—I'm a doctor!"

Steele stared at him. "Then take care of that girl—Walton's daughter. After that get on outside and make yourself useful!"

He ran from the saloon without awaiting any answer. The shooting continued in fitful bursts and he saw a man lying on the plank parapet, another out in the street. A mangy cur was dragging itself frantically from the battle scene, one of its hind legs cut by a chance bullet. A deep pounding floated from the jail.

The ranger looked. Five or six men carried a heavy timber into which spikes had been driven for handles. They lunged forward to smash it against the thick oak door of the jail with a booming sound and the splinter of wood.

"Hit 'er again!" Turner cried. "Smash in, boys! Quick!"

Steele saw cattlemen and cowboys scurrying for cover. The ferocity of the invaders was astounding and they were better organized. Their scathing fire had won them the front of the jail and they would get their men out unless they were picked off by hidden sharpshooters before it was accomplished. The rear of the jail Steele thought was in possession of cattlemen. It had been, at any rate.

He dropped on one knee beside the form of Sheriff Roddy. Steele fumbled in one pocket after another until, discovering the bunch of keys he sought, he straightened and ran alongside the Friendship Saloon to the alley. As he rounded the corner of the building he all but collided with a short and wide-hipped man. The other's weapon levelled first, and the ranger was covered. They peered at each other.

"Where's Walton?" Flash demanded instinctively.

"Huh? Why, I'm Walton! Who're you?"

Steele ignored the gun to pluck his sleeve. "Ruth's here. She's inside the Friendship; got a slight wound. Listen, we—"

"Ruth!" the 7-W owner ejaculated. "I—I told her not to come!"

"She's all right for now. Look here, Walton, are you backing the move to lynch those men in jail? Or do you want the sheep crowd to get them away? I'm goin' to get that pair out and keep 'em safe from both sides if I can. But I'll need help."

The cattleman's face worked with curiosity and puzzlement. He stared intently at Steele, making a hurried appraisal. For an instant he hesitated, worried about his daughter and suspecting some trick.

"Sure. I'll help you. There's nobody at the back now; couple of the boys just ran off when it got too hot for 'em. And I been picking off them sheep loboes when they tried to get too close to the door. Come on!"

The pair broke into a run down the alley. A form loomed out of shadow as if heading for the rear door of the jail. The man spied Walton and Steele and hesitated with a savage oath. His gun flashed at the same instant as Walton's. Both shot wild in the darkness that was pierced only feebly by saloon and jail lights. The fellow turned and scurried back to his hiding. It left the alley deserted for the moment, although sheep and cattlemen would be back.

THE pounding of the timber-end against the front door continued while Steele crouched, trying one key after the other. At last he snapped the lock and putting his shoulder to the door, swung it inward. The jail was damp-smelling and dark except for a kerosene lamp suspended in the corridor that ran between two rows of cells from the rear to the front of the building.

Walton followed close after Steele as gun in hand they scuffed along the corridor. The timber boomed again, and Dick Turner's voice lifted to encourage and hurry his men. The occasional snarling crack of a rifle or sixgun reached the ears of the jail prowlers.

"Turner!" a deep bass rumbled from a cell. "Hey, Crow! Fleck! Bust us outa here, and make it fast!"

Steele halted. He found a short, wiry figure of a man who had his cheeks pressed against the bars; and he knew it must be Jeff Caulson. "Just a second!" He began to try his keys again, quickly discovering one that fit. "Where's Fernvale?"

"Here!"

Steele went to the next cell. Again and again the timber slammed at the front door, until splinters dropped inside and there was an irregular hole visible. "Once more, boys! Hit 'er again a little harder and we're in!" Turner yelled.

Jerry Fernvale stepped out of his cell. He came close to Steele for a piercing scrutiny, but could not identify his rescuer. As the four started by mutual consent for the rear entrance Jerry brushed Fred Walton's shoulder. He realized who it was and gave a short, sharp exclamation.

"Don't try to get away," the rancher warned quickly, his gun covering Fernvale. "We ain't turnin' you two buzzards loose. Not by a dam' sight! We're seein' to it your necks don't get stretched without a proper trial is all."

He added witheringly: "And you wanted to marry my girl! It's a wonder I didn't smell sheep on you!"

As the four moved outside men wriggled through the shattered front door of the jail. "Jeff! Where are you?"

"Here! We're gettin' out the back!"

Steele glanced at Walton. The rancher grabbed young Fernvale's arm while Flash shoved his Colt hard against Caulson. They guided their prisoners up the alley toward the saloon, intent on getting them away to some hiding place until they could obtain horses and leave town. There came a shrill whistle accompanied by a pounding of hoofs that swelled in volume. A dozen saddle horses trotted as from nowhere, driven by Dutch, the sheepman left in their charge half an hour ago.

The cavvy man's whistle repeated, and again. As if by magic the invaders collected, coming singly and in pairs, several trotting out the rear door of the jail. The elder Walton lost Jerry Fernvale in the swarm of men. He was close to Steele and unrecognized as yet by his foes. Of a sudden he whirled, bringing his gun up. His face was etched in rage and his lips bit off words that stung like the pelt of hail.

"Damn you, you tricked me! You low-down, smelly sheep raiser, you got me to help grab those hombres out of jail and then—But you're gonna pay!" Walton shouted.

Steele sidestepped with frantic haste, striking out at the gun. There was a roar, a spurt of flame and a bullet ripped through the skirt of his corduroy jacket. Walton staggered

from a hard punch to his chest. His heel caught and he toppled against the saloon. Caulson aimed a blow at him but missed. Steele jarred into the rancher just before Walton shot again, his bullet plowing dust. Ruth's father went down at the shock of hard knuckles under his ear.

Steele stood panting and ruefully massaging his fist. His lips were curled in an expression of dismay. He stared down at Fred Walton realizing that only swift action had saved his life—but that the same action placed him among sheepmen. Walton would be convinced of that!

Someone clutched his elbow. "Quick work, partner. I'd have got that bullet sure!"

He glanced up scowling. It was Caulson.

CHAPTER III

IN CAMP

THE ranger felt the urge to drop on his knees beside Walton, rouse him, and insist that he understand the truth. But delay was dangerous. Bullets began to shower from two directions as the Indian Creek fighters, organized anew, swarmed at their foes. The sheepmen hurriedly flung themselves on the backs of the shying, startled horses. The alley was splashed with flaming powder as cattle forces advanced from east and west toward their enemies of the range.

"We're leavin'!" somebody shouted.

Steele felt himself propelled by some unseen friend toward a big sorrel. He seized its trailing reins, danced to toe a stirrup, and finally succeeded in mounting. The animal broke into an eager run down the alley and they overtook the trailers of the sheep crowd with some horses carrying double burdens of wounded men anxious not to be left behind.

With lashing rein-ends and pricking spurs they cleared from the range settlement leaving a trail of blood in their wake. The Governor's special ranger singled out Jeff Caulson and maneuvered his sorrel nearer. Jerry Fernvale rode nearby. Steele's face betrayed a mixture of emotions of which worry was dominant. He disliked fleeing town in a way that seemed to identify him with the sheep crowd. But he had no choice in the matter since to remain meant certain death. Indian Creek folk were not in a mood to reason. Walton was bitterly against him now, and if Steele did stay, Walton's accusation and the general appetite for revenge would outweigh anything Flash could offer in defense.

They rode into the night pursued by ranchers and cowboys. But once beyond the town limits it was too dark for any but chance shots to find their marks. And the horses of the invaders were fast. Four men were missing, left behind, and there were wounds aplenty among the ten or twelve who raced from Indian Creek.

But the sheepmen were exultant. They had rescued Jeff Caulson and young Fernvale.

After several miles pursuit seemed to have ended and the riders slowed to an easier pace. There was little talk exchanged during the hour ride into a projecting arm of the foothills. Looming black against the clouded sky, the Captian Mountains crouched along the south like majestic sentinels and the range of wire-grass was still but for the occasional lonely mourning of a coyote.

It was only half an hour before they passed the first greyish mass of sheep that grazed on a hill-slope. Flash

Steele saw the herder rouse from a boulder and run toward the mounted men, his dog trotting at his heels. He called a question that was answered triumphantly. The riders pressed on, passing other flocks of sheep that dozed crouched on all fours, or merely clustered motionless as statues, their woolly bodies bulking against the deep brown of the slopes.

At long last Dick Turner called a halt. Saddle leather creaked; there were groans from the several wounded men. All dismounted and started across a cleared space toward several makeshift tents scattered around an abandoned log shack in a clearing.

Someone poked up a smouldering fire and heaped on fresh wood from a pile of pine limbs. As the needles blazed Dick Turner noticed the ranger for the first time. He stepped over, his look of surprise showing redly in the firelight.

"Say! Ain't you the hombre we roped on top the stage? What you doin' here?"

There was truculence in his tone and he fingered the butt of his holstered gun. His challenge caused other men to discover Steele. They gathered around him wearing black looks of suspicion that mirrored the expression on Dick Turner's face. Scar Dillon of the pock face glared evilly, nursing his wounded arm. One of the men stepped forward for an intent look.

"Huh!" Fleck grunted. "Sure that's him! I oughta know that lobo; rode the roof o' the stage with him, didn't I?" He motioned to a companion. "Arizona, did you see this feller prowlin' around town tonight?"

Steele ignored Fleck and Arizona. He hitched his cartridge belt under his corduroy jacket, gazing calmly at Turner. "I'm here for the good reason that it wasn't safe to stay in town. To judge by the bullets flyin' my way, that cattle crowd don't take to me at all."

"Get rid of him, Turner!" Fleck growled. "Hey Arizona, ain't he the one we saw duck out o' that jewelry store carryin' a lot of stuff? Looks like him to me!"

ARIZONA, a mustached individual who carried his massive head slanted sideways as if his thick, fleshy neck was stiff, stepped very close to scrutinize Steele. He had the scarred, battered visage of a man who has led a life of violence. The ranger bore his deliberate examination coolly.

"That's him," Arizona declared positively. "That's sure him, Turner!"

The leader's weapon came from its holster. "Grab him, boys, and—"

"Hold on!" Caulson elbowed his way nearer. "Dick, I reckon Arizona's mistaken. This feller—"

"You ain't defendin' anybody that takes advantage of a scrap like that to loot stores, are you, Jeff?"

The two men looked ready to square away at each other. "Now wait a minute," Caulson barked incisively. "Are you goin' to take my word or Arizona's?" He gestured at the tough with contempt. "Have we ever caught Arizona riflin'—"

"I tell you Steele's the one!" Fleck broke in. "That there's the same guy that got tough with me on the stage. And by gosh if I don't think Arizona's right!"

"Shut up," Turner ordered. "Jeff, what do you know about Steele?"

Caulson glanced around the intent, truculent group. "I know this," he retorted quietly, "that after all your fightin' you men almost bungled the job far's Fernvale and I are concerned. Whereas this Steele, whoever

he is—he got hold of Sheriff Roddy's keys somehow. He found the coast clear at the back of the jail while you were still smashin' the front door. He came in and got us. Yes, and he even tricked Fred Walton into helpin' him. And once in the alley, he knocked Walton down or I wouldn't be here now; I'd be layin' there dead!"

Fleck and Arizona exchanged significant glances. They began to edge back into the tense, expectant crowd. Turner rubbed his jaw, scowled from Steele to Caulson, then to Fernvale. Jerry spoke up.

"That's right, Turner. I don't know this hombre any more than you do. But he sure came in the jail and got us out of those cells."

"If there was any lootin'," Caulson snapped angrily, "I want whoever did it to hand over what he got, right here and now!" He looked from face to face around the circle of men. "What's that in your shirt, Arizona?"

The other started. "Uh—why—I ain't got nothin' in my shirt!" he blustered. And fingering the bulge of his considerable stomach, he proved his point.

Caulson strode from one man to the next. "I sure appreciate what you boys did for me and Jerry tonight. But I've said again and again that there's to be no lootin'. Our job is to take care of nine thousand sheep, and that's all. If I hear of any thievin' I'll be like to throw down on somebody, I promise you that!"

He glared. Turner sided with him on this. "Jeff, I didn't know about any jewelry store lootin', and that's a fact. But if you find out anybody that did it, just mention him to me. And you won't have to do any shootin'," he snapped. "You'll get there too late to do it!"

There was a brief silence. "Scatter, boys," Turner said gruffly. "Let's all get some sleep."

THE men turned away. But Caulson and Turner remained, and young Jerry Fernvale. Steele saw that Jerry was rather good looking but seemed oddly out of place here, clad as he was in leather chaps, a check shirt with blue bandana at his throat, and heavily spurred boots such as only a cowboy can use.

"Is this right about Steele helpin' you and Caulson?"

"Yes," Fernvale replied shortly.

Turner shifted his gaze to the ranger. "I'd just like to know your game."

"I haven't any game. That's a fact. I'm a stranger here, and like I said, I'm not on your side or the other. But if I'd stayed in town Dad Walton would have made it hot for me. So I came along." He lighted the cigarette he had been building and blew smoke simultaneously from nostrils and mouth. " 'Course if I'm not wanted, I'll go. But I thought maybe you could use me."

"Shucks, Dick," Caulson expostulated, "forget it! Why, he was the only one that even thought of gettin' Roddy's keys." He glanced into the dark, lowering his voice. "I tell you, Steele, we're kind of up against it. With all them sheep, we're forced to employ anybody we can, and some of this bunch are riff-raff. Here we're gettin' blamed for Steve Price's murder and it might be that one of our crowd really did it. Because there was four hundred dollars taken off Price, so the sheriff claims. It was a stickup but he showed fight and there was a killin'."

"Well, the cattle crowd ain't no bunch of angels," Turner growled.

"No they ain't. I reckon if both sides had nothin' but honest men we could settle this here thing. We could find some way to iron it out."

"Settle nothin'!" Turner asserted with bitter skepticism. "Them ranchers won't give an inch to sheep. It's free range 'cept when we want some of it. Free water holes 'cept when we want a drink." He rubbed his chin again in the characteristic way he had. "Well, Steele, you behave around here and I got no objections to you stayin'. But we won't tolerate no underhanded stuff, you get that?"

He turned on his heel with a crisp "G'night, Jeff," and stalked away. Caulson hesitated, looking at Fernvale.

"Give Steele a couple blankets, Jerry, will you? I got a lot to talk over with Dick right now. See you boys in the mornin'."

As he too departed Steele waited expectantly for Fernvale to speak. He stood as before, his face mask-like, wooden. Making a slight gesture he turned on his heel and started for a tent. The ranger followed, reluctant to accept hospitality which seemed grudging, yet having no sound excuse for declining it.

Beside, he was dog-tired. He had come a long distance by train and stagecoach today, had engaged in a series of dangerous events. And he would want to cultivate Jerry Fernvale in the morning. He wanted to draw him out about this whole affair and to report to Jerry that Ruth Walton was anxious about him.

He followed the cowboy inside the tent. Spreading out the pair of blankets handed him, Steele removed his boots, trousers, and shirt. It was only a matter of minutes before he was deep in sleep, and it seemed only a few minutes more until he opened his eyes to find the sun staring down through a slit in the tent.

Steele sat up, yawning and stretching. He found Fernvale just pulling his trousers on. At Steele's greeting the other returned a civil nod. He still wore that look of wanting to be let alone. But he proved fairly talkative when Caulson stopped in at the tent. Presently Fernvale told Steele where the creek was. They walked toward it together.

After a breakfast of coffee and bacon and hard bread Jerry rose and wandered back toward the creek. Waiting a few minutes, Steele sauntered after. He found Ruth Walton's sweetheart in a brown study, his eyes on the water that rushed past, his forearms on his upraised knees as he sat on the clay bank.

THE ranger dropped beside him. "Like I said last night, I'm a stranger here. I'm interested in bringing peace if I can. It's just plain madness for two sets of men to battle over territory like this when the west is big enough for all and plenty to spare."

Fernvale scowled at him, then tried a smoke ring. Steele went on: "I met Ruth Walton last night. We were both on the stage—"

The low exclamation stopped him. "Ruth? You're sure?"

"Yes. I talked with her, rode with her from Junction to Indian Creek. She was worried about you. Afraid some of those cowpunchers were goin' to drag you and Caulson out of jail and have a necktie party at dawn this mornin'."

The clear grey eyes fixed on him in the peculiarly level, searching way Fernvale had. A man of few words,

he seemed always to reflect before he spoke.

"Yeah. Caulson and I heard about that from Sheriff Roddy and his deputy. I reckon it would have happened," he said slowly, "if the boys hadn't come after us." He hesitated, staring down at his cigarette. "By now Ruth's talked with her father, and she'll sure have no use for me."

His words were bitter. "Well, there's always some way out," Steele encouraged, licking across his cigarette, then sealing it. He narrated his experience with the girl during the stage drive. As he went on Fernvale's jaw slacked and he looked incredulous. Steele mentioned that Ruth had been hit by a bullet, and a curse dropped from Jerry's lips.

When Steele finished the rancher's reserve had melted. "Do you think she —What I mean is, do you figure Ruth believes I had a hand in killing Steve Price?"

"Did you?"

"'Course not! Nor Uncle Jeff either."

"Just a minute. You don't mean 'Uncle Jeff' is Caulson? He's related to you?"

Fernvale nodded glumly. "That's why I'm here. Do you think I give a damn about sheep?

"See," he went on, "I lived with Uncle Jeff several years. Then I cut loose and wandered some, and finally two years ago durin' that drought, I happened here to Indian County. Took on a bunch of scrawny steers a feller had turned loose to die. Managed to drive 'em down to Coyote Pass. Made money at it, so I started buyin' me the Loop-Cross outfit. It ain't much but it's a beginnin'."

Steele flicked ash from his cigarette. "I guess you and the Waltons are neighbors, eh? Don't mean to pry, Fernvale, but I can see Ruth thinks pretty much of you."

"We're plannin' to get married. We were," he corrected gloomily. "Her father'd kill me if we were to meet this minute. And I reckon Ruth hates me now."

The ranger smiled. "No. Women don't change sudden for reasons like that. But you aren't interested in sheep at all?"

The question brought a swift look. "Sheep?" He uttered a sardonic laugh. "I hate 'em! They clean the range like a dog cleans a bone. No steer can live —Pshaw, you know about that. But Uncle Jeff always treated me good, and what could I do? He sees sheep different than I do. He didn't want trouble with me, so he rode up to my place couple nights ago. We was settin' down to eat, talkin' things over, when in busts Sheriff Roddy and that excitable deputy. Snow, his name is. And Walton, and Moran of the Bent Fork, and some others."

He flipped the butt of his cigarette into the rushing creek. "The long and short of it was, they claimed we murdered Steve Price an robbed him. Tough hombre named Colville said he saw us gettin' away. Why, Steve Price and I were good friends!"

"Got any idea who might have killed him?"

"Some. But look at the fix I'm in! There's my uncle settin' in my house with me. He's a sheepman, so Walton jumps to the conclusion I've turned traitor. Him'n all the others. Why, they even talked about lynchin' me. And the lynchin' would have been a lot more on account of sheep than Steve Price's murder!"

THEY talked awhile longer. Steele began to feel admiration for Jerry Fernvale because he was plainly

a man of high principles, suffering the present misfortune through sheer accident. That he despised sheep like all men of his background, was readily apparent. At the same time he had a sense of loyalty toward Jeff Caulson, his uncle. And he was harassed with indecision what step to take next. If he returned to the cattle crowd his life was in danger. Yet he wanted to erase their doubts as to his true feelings. He wanted, too, no further part in the warfare between the two classes of stockraisers.

Most of all he was worried about his engagement to Ruth Walton. Undoubtedly it was broken now. Her father was hotly opposed to Jerry. Whether sheepmen or cattlemen achieved victory in this struggle for range, Fernvale felt himself an outcast and a jilted man.

The two sat silent a long time. At last Fernvale rose determinedly. "I'm goin' back to my spread today. I got to see now things are. If I was you, Steele, I'd clear out and have nothin' more—"

The ranger lifted his hand for silence. Fernvale scowled questioningly at him and they stood listening. Their eyes met with quick significance and the two stepped hurriedly into a patch of high shrubs nearby.

They were none too quick to shield themselves. The pad of booted feet and the clop of horses came louder. Fleck and Arizona appeared leading their mounts, which they turned into the creek. Pausing on the bank, they fell into heated discussion.

"—want my share and I want it now!" Fleck notified angrily. "I split on that Price money, didn't I? Then come across with some o' that jewelry. We agreed to go halves, Arizona. Fork over!"

They stood with their backs turned to the pair in the bushes. After further wrangling which threatened to resolve in gunplay Arizona at last seemed to yield. He jammed a hand inside the belt of his trousers.

"All right, then, we'll settle now, Fleck," he soothed. "No need to get all worked up, is there? Why, I always split with you, only I don't like draggin' the stuff out so close to camp. But say, wait till you see what I got!"

Sucking breath sharply, Steele reached out to restrain Jerry Fernvale. But the young rancher was already forging out of the bushes, whipping his Colt from its holster. "Reach, you loboes! Reach, or—"

His toe caught under a root and he pitched forward. The two thieves leaped to their feet as if struck at by a rattler. Weapons sprang into their fists with magic speed. Steele lunged after Fernvale and just as he raised his sixgun Fleck fired.

The bullet caught Fernvale just above the hip. He was agilely recovering balance after jerking his foot from under the root. He reeled, twisting sideways. For an instant as he poised his face was upturned and there was startlement and pain etched on his leathery features. While the other three men watched during that slow three seconds Jerry went down with a crash.

The eyes of Arizona and Steele clashed. The sheepman fired. But he was late by a fraction of a second. A yell broke from his lips and he staggered, clutching his right arm at the biceps. Fleck, only a few yards from the ranger, charged, bringing up his gun. His mean eyes were stormy with hate. His weapon knocked Steele's down with a clack of metal on metal. The muzzle of his Colt jammed hard into Steele's stomach as he bellowed back toward the camp:

"Hey! We grabbed 'em! We grabbed 'em splittin' that jewelry loot! Caulson! Turner! Hey, boys!"

CHAPTER IV

STEELE'S MISTAKE

THE quick wit of the man was astounding. It held Flash Steele motionless and indecisive. The weapon had been wrenched from his fist by that hard downward blow and his fingers stung as at the prick of a thousand needles from the shock of it. Then realization shot through his brain that Fleck could have killed him and would like to do it, but that he had hit upon a better ruse.

He meant to turn Steele and young Fernvale over to the leaders of the sheepmen with harsh accusation of last night's jewelry store robbery during the Indian Creek raid. Thus he and Arizona would free themselves of suspicion. And they would still have all the loot in their possession except just enough to convict Steele and Jerry in the eyes of the men already rushing down the slope from the camp.

His eyes clashed with the beady, menacing eyes of Fleck. Over his shoulder Steele saw Arizona jerking out watches, rings, and jewelled pins which he spilled over and near Jerry Fernvale. They were a swift-thinking pair!

And Jerry looked seriously hurt. That worried Steele.

All this flashed through his mind in seconds. Steele's wide shoulders slacked. He grunted, retreating from the jab of the sixgun muzzle. It was evident by his mien that hopelessness possessed him, that he was cowed.

But suddenly, cat-quick, he chopped one hand down on the barrel of Fleck's gun. It throbbed under his palm and there was a hard blow, a stab of pain, at his thigh. The force of the hurtling bullet knocked Steele backward and he would have tumbled on his spine but for the grip he still had on the forty-five.

As it was he jerked Fleck forward. The weapon loosened in Fleck's grasp. Again it exploded. Gulping a yell Arizona dropped the stolen jewelry in his hands to go for the Colt he had just holstered. Steele brought up a left fist that sped with terrific force at Fleck's jaw.

The man twisted his head away. But the fist smashed just under his ear and he staggered as if clubbed. His finger dragged over the trigger of his gun as he reeled back, but Steele had it ripped from his grasp before the third explosion sent a bullet screaming wild.

Arizona drew. But he had to wait or injure his confederate, who was in the way. Steele tripped Fleck, twirled the captured forty-five, and shot with it. The two explosions sounded like one. The black oily mop of hair on Arizona's head seemed to lift. His own bullet cut a patch of cloth from Steele's coat collar. Steele charged him, but in his frantic haste the Colt somehow slipped from his fingers. He bashed a left and right at the two hundred pound giant until Arizona lurched drunkenly against a pine trunk and went down with the thud of a sack of grain.

Shouts floated from the direction of the camp. Questions came mufflediy through the trees. Panting, Steele bent to get Fleck's fallen Colt. Then he regained his own and hurried to Jerry Fernvale. His glance brought a quick intake of breath and for a moment he was not sure Fernvale lived.

But then he saw the man's grey eyes open, soft with pain. Saw a certain pleading note deep within them —and was shocked to fresh, hurried action. Dick Turner, dashing down the slope, barked a command that Steele throw up his hands.

Instead, he clasped one hand under Fernvale's neck, the other under his knee. Turner's view of him still was obscured by trees and bushes. Steele swung the muscular rancher off the ground and staggered with his burden through a dusty shrub. Two explosions pounded close behind him. Turner, fearing ambush, paused and bellowed for aid.

Steele staggered along the creek bank until he found the two horses of Fleck and Arizona. He waded in and hoisted young Fernvale at the saddle of the first, which had its reins hooked over a crooked root on the bank. But his lift was not high enough, and Jerry sagged back heavily into his arms.

There came a groan. "I—I can make it!"

STEELE stood him in the knee-deep stream. Jerry toppled against the saddle, his hands clutching for cantle and horn. Steele boosted, and the rancher flopped on his stomach across the leather. Throwing the reins up, Steele grabbed wildly at the pale tan pony backing startledly away. He got the reins and yanked its head around. The next moment Steele hit the saddle, gouging his bootheels at the animal's ribs.

Turner burst into view on the bank. Steele fired quickly, not to wound but to drive him back. Turner blazed away twice and one of his bullets scraped a long gash across the flank of Fernvale's mount. It leaped into the air, came down with a splash, and went clattering down the creek. The ranger spurred after.

A sharp turn of the stream closed them from Turner's sight. Steele caught up with the blue roan and grabbed its bridle strap. Fernvale still clung somehow, gushing air at every thump of his body in the saddle, his face ashen but set with grimness. Steele dragged the roan out of the creek and through a high, wide swath of sharp-edged marsh grass. Behind them yells and imprecations faded and at length were gone from hearing.

But pursuit would commence at once. It would be an easy thing for Arizona and Fleck to claim that Steele had looted the Indian Creek jewelry store last night during the raid. And Steele's escape with Fernvale cast Jerry in a bad light. Even his uncle might be swung against him before that scoundrelly pair got through!

They rode on, but slowly. The rancher could manage no more than to cling to the mane of his roan with one hand, the saddle horn with the other. He lay forward over the horse's withers as the roan, a highblower, panted loudly. There was a dark bloody splotch on his trousers and shirt at the side, just at his slanted cartridge belt. The blood soaked an ever-widening area. Fernvale must still have the bullet in his flesh, perhaps lodged against his hip bone so that every movement blazed out pain.

They had traversed another mile when Steele saw the man had fainted. There was nothing to do but halt before Fernvale suddenly toppled from the saddle with perhaps more serious damage resulting to his hurt hip. Steele swung down, and drawing Jerry out of his saddle, laid him gently as possible under a waving row of willows.

Straightening, he listened. But he heard no sounds of pursuit. Eyes squinted, he reflected that Turner might assume they had ridden down the creek a longer distance. Turner would not know how much Fernvale was hurt, or perhaps that Jerry was wounded at all.

The ranger brushed a sleeve over his forehead to mop perspiration away. Dropping on his knees, he drew Jerry's blue shirt from his trousers. It was soaked with blood. Leaning back on his heels the ranger hesitated worriedly. He feared to try to deal with that wound lest he make it bleed harder. Finally he rose, untied the bandana from Jerry's throat, and hurried to the nearest bank of the creek.

A distant shout made his face relax in a grim half-smile. Steele knew the pursuers were splashing down the creek beyond the point at which he and Fernvale were. With the bandana soaked in cold water he went back and squeezed it on Jerry's forehead. After what seemed an interminable wait the man's eyes fluttered open.

"Can you ride a little more? I want to get you home!"

There was a pause. "Reckon—I can make it."

"Where is your place? Which way? Or had we better go to some other spread?"

"No." He winced at a dart of pain. "Down to range and then northeast. Red barn just painted, little house with—with the job half-done."

He closed his eyes again. Steele hurried back to soak the bandana, returning a moment later. He worked over Fernvale, urging him to waste no strength in further talk. After awhile he felt sure the rancher was not going to faint again, and lifting him, after a great deal of jockeying and straining, put him astride on the roan.

HE took the horse's reins, mounted his own animal, and set out. He felt certain Jerry was not mortally hurt. Loss of blood was a dangerous thing, of course. But capture by Turner and his crowd was the last thing Steele wanted just now. Because Fleck, with the cupidity of his kind, must realize that Steele and Fernvale had overheard about the murder of Steve Price. And Fleck could not afford to let that information get out.

There would be no capture—not if Fleck spied the fugitives. There would be two more murders.

They reached flat range. It was midmorning, and in the distance Steele saw a cowboy driving a hundred or more steers that raised a lazy, ballooning dust cloud. But his back was turned and he did not look around. Steele pressed on, taking a circuitous route whenever he saw cattle or riders or the buildings of a ranch.

He kept searching for a red barn and a half-painted house. Now and then he slowed abreast Fernvale's horse. Jerry was conscious but his eyes were pain-wracked in a way that proved his suffering, and his hands clutching the mane of his roan were white-knuckled, straining. Under the deep tan of his face there was a yellowish hue that was not good to see.

Steele kept thinking about the whole affair. He knew, or thought he knew, why Fernvale had been painting his house. Not many homes in this country were painted, but Jerry hoped to be married—probably in the Fall, when he had sold his prime beef. But would Ruth Walton's father ever give his consent now?

He felt deep sympathy for the girl and man on opposite sides of a fierce struggle, and through no fault of their own. Steele's blue-grey eyes squinted harder as he lifted his sombrero, then

drew it low over his forehead. Ruth would not likely go against her father. Their romance was smashed—unless somehow, special ranger that he was, he could manage to bring peace to Indian County.

He shook his head. "Can't see how to fix it. Not the way folks are all hatin' each other. And now with Walton against me, and Turner and prob'ly Caulson too, why I can't even get either side to listen."

At last Steele discovered a red barn lifting over the heat-blurred range. He urged his horse to a trot, dragging Fernvale's after. There were no signs of activity around the place, no life but the half dozen horses craning their necks over corral rails. A log building appeared to be a bunkhouse but Steele thought the two or three men Fernvale might employ must be out working his stock.

He rode up to the front door of the clapboard place that had a queerly unbalanced look, painted red only as high as a man on the ground could reach. The upper part was bare and studded with sun-sucked nails. Steele dismounted, tipped Jerry into his arms, and carried him inside. It was a dwelling of three rooms and a small kitchen. He placed the hurt man on a tumbled bed. Fernvale looked up at him.

"The hosses. I can—can wait. Stock needs to be watered."

Steele frowned, his tow-colored brows knitting. But he went out to put their mounts in the corral and pumped water into the corral trough. Returning, he put a kettle on the kerosene stove to heat, then began to cut Jerry's trousers away with a knife.

It was an ugly wound, purpling under the coagulated blood. His light, searching fingers seemed to verify that the bullet was lodged against the hip bone as he had suspected. And it was too deep for Steele to attempt to remove.

Going to the kitchen for the hot water, he pondered what was best to do. Perhaps someone would ride past whom he could send for a doctor—that yellow-faced, frightened doctor Steele had found hiding behind the overturned table in the Friendship Saloon. But news of Fernvale's presence would spread rapidly, and it might mean more trouble. Charged with murder, he would be taken into custody by the deputy sheriff. Or by a deputation of ranchers.

"Feeling runs too high," Steele muttered. "It ain't safe. I don't want to turn Jerry over for another try at lynchin', maybe."

He could arrive at no decision. The bullet need not be extracted at once but he wanted to make Fernvale comfortable. Going back to the bedroom he washed the wound as gently and thoroughly as possible. In a drawer he found clean rags kept for bandage use, and a soothing salve.

Steele worked over the man for an hour. Fernvale, he discovered then, had dropped into a deep sleep.

The ranger tiptoed out of the room. He sat on the small, square porch building a cigarette. From time to time he returned for a look at the patient but always Fernvale was sleeping.

The day dragged past. No one came near the half-painted headquarters of the Loop-Cross. His visits to the sick room told Steele that fever was gathering in Fernvale, and the more it gathered the more he disliked the thought of deserting him. What if Fleck and Arizona trailed them here, guessing where the men would come? It might mean murder.

"'Sides, I don't know which way to Walton's," Steele muttered aloud as he paced the scantily furnished living room at nightfall. "If I could tell Ruth I reckon she'd know how to get that sawbones out here without lettin' the whole county in on it."

He halted, his hand going to the gun holstered on his thigh. Someone was talking . . . . in the sickroom.

But when he rushed there it was to feel fresh dismay. Young Fernvale was worse. Delirious, he kept babbling half-coherently, stirring restlessly in the bed.

TWENTY minutes later, as a sickle moon rose out of the east, Steele saddled a Loop-Cross horse in the corral. He rode east, the direction in which he calculated Indian Creek lay. There was hope in him of finding the Walton ranch and that he might somehow contact Ruth. It would be foolhardy to appeal to anyone else, including Ruth's father. That would mean delivering Jerry to the law or to vigilantes as a murderer of Price. And how ever Steele denied that, he would be disbelieved.

He skulked afoot through the yards and beside the barns of two cattle outfits. Reading the brands on horses in the corrals, he knew these were not what he sought. Steele sneaked back to his ground-reined tan pony, mounted, and rode on.

But sometime after ten he found the Walton place. It was a large layout with several barns and sheds, two corrals, and a big, sprawling house. As Steele walked carefully through one of the barns and paused within its doorway he saw the last light blot in the house. Evidently Fred Walton was retiring, and Ruth must already be asleep.

For a few minutes there was a light in a bedroom. When it vanished Steele prowled noiselessly to the protection of the long rectangular shadow beside the Walton home. He crouched under the window that had showed the light, reflecting on his whole problem. But again it seemed the best move he could make. Rising, he called softly:

"Ruth!"

There was no answer.

Steele tried again but without result. He was afraid of rousing the elder Walton, and suddenly decided to enter the room. Without a sound he swung a leg over the sill and dropped cat-like inside. As his eyes became accustomed to the deeper darkness he placed a bed, an old fashioned dresser, and a stand with white pitcher and bowl.

A minute passed. The ranger knew full well the dire consequences of his intrusion if he were caught. A night prowler could justifiably be killed. The fact that it was Ruth Walton's room he entered made his risk greater in the eyes of the stern pioneer folk of the cattle country.

Scarcely daring to breath Steele tiptoed across the room to the bed. He could vaguely see a head against the pillow, the face turned ceiling-ward. Steele reached out a hand to touch that pillow, hoping the slight movement would bring Ruth awake without causing her startlement and a resultant outcry.

What happened then came so unexpectedly that the ranger went cold. The occupant of the bed whipped out a half-bare arm, and there was a darkly menacing sixgun clutched in the bony fist. A man's tones crackled at Steele with threat of immediate death.

"Throw up your hands 'less you want to die!" Fred Walton cried.

CHAPTER V

THE GOVERNOR'S LETTER

STARTLED and gripped with dismay, Steele backed until he felt the edge of the washstand behind him. His eyes swung hurriedly this way and that but the window through which he had entered was too far on his left to risk a dive for freedom. There appeared to be no chance to dash for the door to other rooms of the house.

Fred Walton swung quickly out of bed and rose enveloped in a white nightshirt. "Stand still! Keep your hands up! I can see plenty good enough to drill you!"

He advanced to a chair at the foot of his bed. "You're packin' a gun, of course. Don't move for it, hear?" Fumbling, he obtained a match from his trousers draped over the chair and stepped to the dresser. His weapon remained level in his right hand while, holding the match in his left, he struck it alight. Then lifted the lamp chimney and touched the wick. Replacing the chimney, Walton whipped out his match as he kept staring at Steele, watching him closely for the least indication of a move to get his Colt.

"Huh! So it's you!" he ejaculated.

Steele said nothing.

"Turn around and face the wall!" the 7-W ranchowner barked angrily. "Keep reachin', mister, if you know what's good!" When the ranger had obeyed with slow reluctance Walton padded nearer and of a sudden snatched the gun from his holster, throwing it on the bed.

"All right. Stay that way!"

Steele thought fast. He had no desire now to try to escape, and for more than one reason. He had come here to get help for Jerry Fernvale. And he did not want to injure Walton in any scuffle that would result from a break for freedom. Nothing could be accomplished by such a clash.

But he felt an intense disgust for himself. How had he made such a blunder? At the very least it meant delay, and meanwhile Jerry was out there in his half-painted ranch house alone. And last night in Indian Creek Walton had become convinced that Steele was siding with the sheepmen. He would have to be won over somehow.

Facing the blank wall, he heard the rancher pull on his trousers, then his boots, using only one hand for the operation. After a moment Walton muttered a command to turn around. They stared at each other. "Come to steal an' kill like all your kind, eh? Sheepmen are all a bunch o' thieves!"

His words stung. But the ranger forced a patient look as he shook his head. "I'm not in the sheep business. You won't believe it, but I'm not. Look here, I thought this was Ruth's room. I wanted to—"

"Ruth's room!" his captor shouted. "Why, you low-down—Meant to kidnap her, I bet! Confounded lobo, you—"

"Father! Is someone in the house?"

They heard the patter of feet outside the door. It swung inward and Ruth's startled face appeared. Amazement crossed her countenance and became incredulity. "Wh-why," she breathed. *"You!"*

The rancher's eyes slid to corners startledly. "Eh? You know this hombre? Why, he's one o' them sheepmen!"

"Wait, Father. Don't move. I'll be right back!"

They heard her rush into the next room which evidently was hers. A moment later Ruth reappeared clad in a

corduroy divided skirt and pongee blouse, her feet in slippers, her shimmering yellow hair flowing down her shoulders. She entered to find the men still holding their rigid tableau. The girl's eyes betrayed her deep puzzlement. But they sparkled angrily, too, as they fixed on Steele.

"Was he trying to rob us?"

"Said he thought this was your room. Kidnappin'!"

"That's foolish!" Steele flung out sharply. "If I was out to kidnap her for any reason, why didn't I do it before now?" He shifted position, the movement instantly bringing the forty-five to menace him again. "Listen a minute, will you? I know this looks queer. I can see neither of you has much use for me. But that's because you don't savvy this whole thing. Walton," he asked, "will you let me get a cartridge out of my belt?"

"What! Why should I do that?"

Steele realized that before he mentioned Fernvale it would be best to identify himself, thus winning their confidence. He knew that in their present suspicious frame of mind both the girl and her father would be loath to believe his story. A certain amount of delay was inevitable. The quickest way to convince them would be to begin at the beginning. And seldom as he had used that identification letter of Governor Maridale's, he thought this was one of the crucial moments for which it was intended.

"You folks are wonderin' about me, and I can settle all that. What I want is to show you a letter stuffed in that cartridge."

THEY exchanged quick, questioning looks. At a gesture from her father Ruth stole cautiously nearer Steele, careful not to come between him and the gun. "All right," Flash assented readily, "you take the cartridge. Fourth from the buckle."

His confidence and words plainly were baffling to them. Ruth obtained the cartridge and stepped away turning it over and over in her hand. She retreated to her father, who also stared at it. "Just work the lead out," Steele instructed coolly. "It'll come easy."

She tried it and as the bullet dropped in her palm, Ruth showed further surprise. There were edges of white paper showing in the cartridge, which she grasped and pulled. A thin pellet came forth. Unrolling it while her blonde brows showed deep perplexity, the girl scanned the message.

"Why—why, it's signed by Governor Maridale!"

"Now listen," Steele begged. "I'm a special ranger. I don't wear any badge or uniform, and I carry that letter just for cases like this. I'm sent here to do whatever I can about this sheep trouble. I'm not on either side. Read the letter, Walton."

He looked slightly dazed and hesitant. Still fearing a trick he again ascertained that Steele was against the washstand a considerable distance from the open window, unarmed, and seemingly no menace. Walton shifted his gun to his daughter's hand, at the same time taking from her the thin, crinkly sheet of paper. While she guarded Steele he leaned to the lamplight and read the brief message, then scowled at the signature of Governor Maridale.

"Huh! It might be a fake for all I know."

"You can wire the Governor and find out. But any more delay might mean Jerry Fernvale dies."

He said that to shock them, and it succeeded. There was a gasp from

Ruth, a look of anxiety on her face. "What do you mean?"

Steele gave his story. He told how he and Fernvale had encountered suspicion on the part of Arizona and Fleck in the camp of the sheepmen, how they had fled with Jerry wounded. As he proceeded the ranger saw the girl's features become more tense. Her blue eyes wrenched from his face as she glanced appealingly at her father. When Steele finished there was a short silence.

"I—I wish I knew if this is true!" Ruth breathed.

"It can't be, honey. Sounds like a tall yarn. Nothin' more!"

The captive sighed. "You've got that letter to prove who I am. I tell you Jerry needs attention, and you'd better believe it, Ruth."

"Where is he?"

Steele hesitated. He felt that it was unsafe to reveal yet that Jerry was at his Loop-Cross ranch. If Walton were not convinced about Steele he might hold him here, rouse a few of his cowboys, and ride over to take Jerry a prisoner. That murder charge involving Steve Price still hung over Fernvale's head. And the lynch talk of last night might rise stronger now against Jerry because of the street fight in Indian Creek with its toll of dead and wounded cattlemen.

"I'll tell you where he is when I know you'll help him."

Walton flung the letter on the dresser. "Ruth, you recognized this hombre first off. Where'd you know him?"

"On the stage. I told you about it."

"Yeah. Well, and what do you think now?"

SHE looked down at her hands. With lips pursed the girl reflected a moment, lifting her eyes for a new scrutiny of Steele. "I— don't know, Father. On the stage he seemed to want to help. I mean, he did put up a fight. It was dangerous to jump on the roof at that man with the shotgun. And they didn't seem to like him they tied him up and then forced me to drive right in town.

"That part puzzles me," she admitted slowly. "But what I heard afterward—while I was in the Friendship Saloon—Oh, I don't know!"

The ranger shifted his cartridge belt, hooking his thumbs inside it. The time they wasted here made him more and more uneasy and anxious. Yet all he could do was win father and daughter over as quickly as possible.

"What'd you hear?" he questioned in a controlled tone.

"That there are nine thousand sheep up in the hills. I heard two men who came in there talk about it. They meant to rifle the cash drawer but they didn't find anything and they were very angry."

"Somebody looted the cash drawer ahead of 'em," Steele returned quietly. "You may have seen him lyin' on the floor with a bullet in his neck? If they searched that gent they must have found the money on him."

She gazed at him, nodding slightly. "Yes. I saw him." Again mystification stamped her pretty face and she was silent, trying to form a new judgment of Steele. "But I heard those two say that at a certain time the sheep are going to be rushed into the very best range, right at the elbow of Indian Creek. That's where our ranch and Moran's and the Circle 44 and Begg's place all meet. It's the finest grass for miles. It's all irrigated."

She went on, her eyes accusing: "And they mentioned that a new gunman had just arrived. Something they

said about him—a sort of description—made me know they meant you."

Steele cocked his head curiously. He could not understand this, nor at the moment recall any sheep man who resembled him. "It isn't me or we wouldn't have had the ruckus on the stage. You read Governor Maridale's letter again. Ruth," he added, "don't you care whether Jerry Fernvale gets taken care of properly? When I left him he was delirious."

She paled. Her eyes fluttered lower and she half-turned as if to appeal to her father. Walton spoke then.

"What about you and me there at the jail last night? You came along, told me you aimed to prevent a lynchin' and would I help. I did help. Then, soon as we got them two fellers to the alley, up comes a crowd of your pals. Sheepmen! You tricked me, Steele!"

"Not at all. You jumped at conclusions. How could I tell in advance it would happen like that? Those fellows are no pals of mine—not any more than your cowboys. My job is to stay neutral and get this thing settled. But you tried to kill me when you saw all that sheep crowd. I had to treat you a little rough to live!"

THEY struggled with doubt, father and daughter studying him, then glancing at each other. "And as far's young Fernvale is concerned," the rancher continued bitterly, "why I reckon Jerry's showed his true colors. He's betrayed his own kind. I sure didn't expect it of a man comin' to see my daughter. Yes, and even talkin' about gettin' married to her!"

"Wait. You've got the wrong slant on Jerry too. You were with the sheriff and others the time Caulson and Jerry were captured? At Jerry's house, wasn't it? Well the truth is that a pair of toughs in the sheep gang really killed Price. I know that, but I haven't any court proof. These fellows are just bums; every time they get a chance they loot a store or somebody's pockets while you cattlemen and sheepmen fight it out."

There was no comment on this. Walton waited.

"Caulson had dropped in to see Jerry, talk things over. They didn't want any trouble. They're fond of each other. You see, Caulson bein' Jerry's uncle, he didn't—"

Both listeners gasped. Ruth lifted a hand to her throat and her blue eyes widened. "His uncle!"

"Sure. Didn't he ever mention his Uncle Jeff?"

Swallowing hard, she looked up at her father. "Why yes. Yes, many times. I—somehow I didn't remember the last name. I've seen letters from his Uncle Jeff. I should have known!" she exclaimed.

"Well, there you are. Caulson is for sheep, but he didn't want trouble with Jerry. They were havin' a bite to eat as I understand it, when the sheriff and some more of your crowd busted in. Grabbed both of 'em on a murder charge just on the say-so of somebody named Colville. And you jumped at the conclusion that Jerry was hatchin' a plot to betray cattle folks, to help run sheep on this range and ruin you all. It's stupid!"

There was a long silence. Fred Walton's expression changed from incredulity to slow suspicion. He seemed to weigh the whole account Steele had given and to find it for the most part convincing—but not entirely so. He was remembering how much was at stake here. That if they believed Steele and he was merely lying quick-wittedly, talking himself out of this midnight capture . . .

Walton lifted his shoulders in the nervous way he had. He ran short fingers through his thin grey hair, blinking reflectively. He cast a sidelong glance at Ruth to find her eyes fixed on him with inquiry whether to accept all this.

"Darned if I know," he muttered. "But look, this is liable to be some kind of trap. If I fall for it and them sheepmen grab me, they could turn their woollies loose on my range without anybody knowin' till it was too late. Then we'd be ruined.

"Another thing," he argued. "That letter from the Governor. Why don't this feller wear a badge or a uniform? Whoever heard of a ranger goin' around with a measly letter? Who asked for a ranger to come here, anyhow?"

"Sheriff Roddy asked, and the Governor wired me. I work undercover and report only to Maridale. Which ought to explain about the badge and uniform. Ignore that letter, Walton, and you may land in more hot water than you're in with this sheep business. Furthermore," he notified, "whatever new trouble happens in this county will be your responsibility, not mine!"

THE rancher bristled. His piercing eyes roved to the letter on the dresser. Picking it up he scanned it once more. Then he looked at Ruth. "What do you think?"

It was plain that she was worried about Jerry Fernvale. The way the rose color in her cheeks had drained away at first mention of him convinced Steele that she cared—cared with all her heart. But the discussion since seemed to have roused doubt in her mind that clashed with a certain willingness to believe. She hesitated a long moment. Then throwing back her head so that the golden hair cascaded on her shoulders, she looked straight at her father.

"I think it's a trick to let sheepmen rush in here just as those men in the saloon said they intend to do!"

Fred Walton gave a triumphant exclamation. "Darn it, Ruth, that's just the way I figure!"

With a sudden movement he tore the onionskin letter in two. Placing the halves together, he ripped them again and again, until the letter was in small, ragged bits. Walton let them flutter from his hand while Steele, with an astounded look etched on his face, watched like a man in a dream.

There came shouts and the clatter of hoofs outside. "Fred! Hey, Walton!" a raucous voice floated through the window. "They're comin' tonight, Fred! *Sheep!*"

CHAPTER VI

FLECK'S REVENGE

THAT warning cry galvanized Walton, made him wheel on his daughter. "Get out there, Ruth! Tell Snow I'll come right away and that I nabbed a sheepman prowlin' our house!"

She poised an instant, staring at Steele with a look of indecision. Then the girl ran from the room and they heard her emerge on the front porch calling to the riders in the yard. With an impatient curse Walton gestured with his sixgun. "Go on through that door. And be careful, Steele, for I'll be comin' right along!"

The ranger crossed the room. As he went into the hallway Walton grasped his shirt collar from behind and pressed the muzzle of the gun in his other hand against the ranger's back. They moved through the dark living room, Ruth's father alert to detect his

captive's slightest false movement and ready to deal with it when it came. They passed through the open front door, went to the edge of the stoop, and walked out toward a group of horsemen.

"Snow! I grabbed one of 'em. What's up?"

Steele heard the excited talk of the possemen and saw one of the 7-W cowboys spurt toward them from the bunkhouse. A man detached himself from the group near the big juniper pole corral and trotted toward Walton. Halting, he peered inquiringly at the captive. He straightened, evidently without recognizing Steele, who in turn thought he remembered having seen the other during the fight in town last night. A metal badge denoting a deputy sheriff clung on the loosely flapping calfskin vest. Jerry had named Sheriff Roddy's helper as Snow.

"Who is he?"

"Got a fancy story about bein' a special ranger for the Governor. But he's one o' that damned sheep crowd. Sneaked right in my room! What's wrong?" Walton panted.

"Plenty. Just met Sam Hicks and he says there's woollies sweepin' across Moran's place and a battle royal goin' on over there. Heard some shots just now. I fogged right here to borry some rifles and carbines, Fred. We ain't got a one with us. See, a few of us boys been trailin' two fellers that busted in the general store tonight and stole—I dunno. A hull wad of cash."

"Here. Take charge of Steele. I'll fetch my gunbelt an' be with you." Walton turned to go back to the house but the lawman stayed him.

"Wait! I don't want you along with us, Fred. Nor any of your men. I got fellers sworn to uphold the law and I can't have any of you steer raisers—"

"Huh?" The other came back truculently. "Mean you come to tell me about sheep but you don't want my help?"

"I want to borry your guns. Rifles and carbines. No sir, I don't want you along, Fred. Be reasonable," the deputy begged, mopping his perspiring face with his sleeve. "If I take a lot of wild rannihans and cattlemen out there it means as much blood spilled as last night in town. What I aim to do is warn those fellers to get—"

"Warn? And if they don't warn good you'll be back with your tail between your legs, eh?" Walton broke into a string of vigorous oaths. He strode close to Snow, gripped the edges of his calfskin jacket, and yanked the man forward. "So you are in with 'em, just like I said. Don't lie, Jonah Snow! Took Jerry Fernvale's two hundred dollars while he was roostin' in jail, didn't you? You sold out to 'em, that's what. Dirty money it was, and don't waste breath denyin' it!" he roared. Then the six foot rancher shook the smaller deputy until Snow's Stetson toppled from his head. "You skunk, I suspected you were bought even before I heard that!"

The situation had its unconscious humor which Steele might have appreciated at another time. But swiftly noting that in their dispute both men had forgotten him, he backed slowly, his eyes seeking a horse of one of the possemen that might be browsing away from the throng.

He turned, prepared to dash toward one of the animals. But two of Snow's men ran up just then to learn what the commotion was about. They had guns bristling in their hands. At the same moment Walton discovered that

Steele was not at his elbow. He bawled a command to seize the ranger. The two raised their guns at him and he was recaptured.

They escorted Steele back to Snow and Walton, who continued in heated debate. "You took that money from Fernvale and don't say you didn't!" Ruth's father insisted.

"Sure I took it. But to keep it safe for him. Think I'm for sheep around here? I—I mean," he corrected hastily, "I don't take any side at all. What I got to do is prevent a range war that—"

"Then why are you standin' here jawin'? Hurry up and prevent it!" Walton flung back. He cupped his hands. "Buck! Hey, Buck!"

"Here, boss. What is it?"

"Get three-four men and hosses and guns. We're headin' out to fight our own battles, seein's the law has got so all-fired squeamish on us. Not take sides!" he snorted at the deputy. "Say, which side of your bread is buttered, anyhow? Cattle side, ain't it? Who put you in that job, gosh knows for what? Who pays your wages, sheepmen?"

SNOW smoothed out his vest and hitched his trousers with a jerk. He was breathing hard and angrily but the sting of these reminders seemed to be effective. With a great effort he controlled himself and spoke in a mollifying tone.

"Now listen here, F. W. You got your view of it, but what I want is to bring peace. Ain't that my job? But —uh," Snow mumbled, "I reckon there's different ways to bring peace, at that. We can't have a lot of dirty sheep around this range, dammit! Why every man in the county—"

"Wait, Snow." A short individual clad in town clothes spoke crisply. "You deputized me to act for peace, not war. Claimed you don't hitch up with either side. Now I hear you talkin' about how sheep have got to go." The man gave a snort of disgust. "All right, I'm headin' home. To the devil with you—callin' yourself a lawman!"

He stalked away. The others gathered curiously around the two principals and stood looking at each other. But as most favored harsh measures to put down the sheep invasion there were no more deserters. Walton emphasized his irritation with a growl.

"What about that two hundred dollar bribe? Did you sell or not?"

"Go on, get your gun belt!" Snow growled in a rage. "Ride with us, then —kill people! I'll show you whether Jerry Fernvale's pants cash bought me! I was just takin' care of it and nothin' more, you hellion!"

Walton scurried back to the house. The two men holding Steele thrust him a few steps forward. "Hey, Jonah, what about him?"

The deputy sheriff peered at Steele again. "What's this you call yourself —a ranger? Never heard tell there was any rangers around this county. Where's your badge?"

"I don't have one. And I don't whistle or blow horns or ring bells to let folks know I'm comin'. Look here, Snow—"

"Slap cuffs on him," the other cut in sharply. "Throw him somewhere he'll keep till we get back. One o' those tool sheds will do. Ranger? About as much as I'm a lamb's winter coat!" he scoffed, swinging on his heel.

No one was actually holding Steele. The two men watched their leader rather than the captive. Steele rushed the deputy, starting a blow at his waist that landed with a smack of knuckles on Snow's cheek. He reeled with a half-uttered cry.

Before he fell the sixgun was wrenched from his hand. He danced away bringing the weapon to a level. "Grab clouds! Drop that artillery, all of you!"

There was a metallic ring in his voice that awed them. And automatically, before they had really considered whether to obey or resist, four men did loosen their gun butts. The Colts thudded to the ground. Steele fired once over the heads of the nearest; then as they shrank back he whirled and raced as fast as his long legs could carry him toward the knot of browsing horses.

In the half-dark they could not see him distinctly. And their complete surprise made them the slower to recover their wits. Jonah Snow was first to howl wrathfully and scoop at a forty-five that lay in the loam of the ranch yard. He fired, and again, wildly.

Steele was already astride the nearest horse. But it went into a series of plunges and bucks that almost hurled him from the saddle before he obtained a firm seat. Somehow he stuck, riding out the spookiness. It ended as abruptly as it began and the horse bolted for the dark, open prairie.

They rounded the bulge of the corral while other shots streaked through the night. Lead whizzed within a few feet of Steele, but he felt certain they could not see him even now. They would, however, begin a quick pursuit. He changed his course for the south and heeled the skittish bronk faster.

THE cool night air bathed his face and neck. Steele was inclined to laugh at thought of the abuse Deputy Snow would receive as soon as Walton learned of this prisoner's escape. But it was no laughing matter—not now. Walton was more thoroughly convinced than ever that Steele was no ranger. This flight would seem to him to prove it.

And Flash had no identification now, nothing but his word. He ground his teeth angrily, thinking of the bits of paper in Walton's bedroom that once had been a letter written for his protection by Governor Maridale.

As he rode he realized regretfully that he had obtained no medical care for Jerry Fernvale. The object of his visit, therefore, was not accomplished. But the best thing he could do now would be start back to Jerry. Steele half decided to stop the first man he saw and ask him to ride for a doctor.

His horse leaped a narrow arroyo and sped on. Steele nodded, his eyes in corners. "Sure, that's what I better do. It'll be my fault if Jerry don't get the right care."

At sound of shots, low and crisp floating through the night, he sat straighter in the saddle. They seemed to come from a point directly ahead of him. But then another burst sounded from his left. Was that the Moran ranch that Snow had mentioned?

A man rode out of another arroyo which Steele had not even noticed. He cut a diagonal course to that of the ranger, spied him, and shouted: "Sheep! They're pourin' 'em in by the thousand!"

He vanished in the night. Steele drew rein, scowling. His experience had been entirely among raisers of beef and he could appreciate how they felt about the defense of their range. Sheep browsing for two weeks would render grass unfit for cattle for a matter of years. They were thorough; they devoured the wire-grass right down to its roots. Too often they killed it.

His urgent impulse was to join in that fight. His sympathies from the

days when he rode for Dad Cornell near Squaw Creek far to the south, were entirely with cattle. Yet . . . . Steele realized that had he been brought up in an environment of sheep, it would be sheep he favored.

And he was a ranger. As Snow loudly protested, the task of a lawman was first to maintain peace. Only when that attempt failed was force justified. And Steele's job here was to bring about some sort of compromise that would prevent future clashes between the two classes of citizens.

His hand went impulsively to the fourth loop of his cartridge belt. But the shell and the letter he had carried through many a special assignment for Governor Jim Maridale were gone. Steele issued a growl and kicked his horse to a lope again. As he did so the shots became louder. They seemed to form a sort of arc around him—and suddenly he distinguished the greyish forms of sheep.

"Buck! Is that you?"

It was a hesitant, pleading cry. With an exclamation Steele brought the bronk around, his eyes seeking to probe the darkness of the range. It came again, the words indistinguishable. The ranger turned and rode toward the cottonwood trees that lined the creek ahead.

As he neared them someone ran forward. "Buck? I—I lost my horse. The cinch was loose—"

Steele swung out of leather. "Oh!" the voice gasped, and his accoster retreated hastily.

"It's me—Flash Steele. You don't need to be scared of me Ruth—er, Miss Walton," he corrected quickly.

He had to wait a moment, unable to locate her. At last she walked forward as if ready to turn and flee on instant notice. Steele chuckled, trying to reassure her. "Your dad had kind of a hot time with the deputy sheriff," he remarked. "They forgot me, so I left. But what are you doin' here?"

She peered up at him, and he saw that Ruth had tucked her yellow hair under a Stetson several sizes too large which rested very low on her forehead. She wore riding boots now in place of her small slippers, and she carried a quirt dangling from her wrist. Studying him a moment, she seemed to find confidence in what she saw.

"Mr. Steele, tell me. Tell me the truth, because it isn't going to matter very much—I mean, I can't do anything to you. *Are* you a ranger?"

"You might as well call me Flash, bein' as I'm not used to mistering. Sure I'm a ranger. That letter was gospel."

She twisted her hands nervously. "Well, on the stage you— But I don't know! That is," she corrected, "I feel now as though I believe it. I don't seem to be afraid you're going to hurt me much anyhow. And why should you be so concerned about Jerry unless—I mean, I don't think you're really in with the sheepmen or they would have known you there on the stage."

She was confused. "Where were you goin' alone like this?"

"I wanted to see Jerry. I thought maybe he'd be at the Loop-Cross.

"So you skipped out, eh? Jerry is at the Loop-Cross, and that's where I'm headin'. He needs you," Steele assured earnestly. "He really needs a doctor, but maybe you can help. Maybe his wound isn't serious; maybe it is. He was delirious, anyhow."

As she looked up at him wistfully and anxiously Steele turned to his horse. "I guess he'll carry both of us. You take the saddle."

SHE mounted, after which he climbed on the bronk behind her. They exchanged no further talk as, with the girl guiding the animal, they set out southeasterly. After a half-mile ride Ruth turned the horse through Indian Creek at a shallow place. Going through the trees they emerged on flat, bare land again. Both sucked breath sharply.

The greyish mass close in front was coming their way. The sheep moved in close formation, driven by yelling, swearing mounted men and to an accompaniment of barking dogs. For behind the mass gunshots spattered in the dark. The forces of Rancher Moran, perhaps aided now by Snow and Walton and the others, were routing the invasion of the woollies.

"Better go around 'em wide. They're on the run, all right!" Steele exclaimed. "But say, that isn't all the sheep those fellows have, Ruth. That's not nine thousand, nor even half that many!"

She re-directed the horse and urged it faster. The gunshots swung to their right and they were not in the line of fire. Looking back, Steele thought he saw a pile of sheep where one or two had been killed and others stumbled over them. The rest were running with a low thunderous sound, pursued and whipped at by the men of Turner and Jeff Caulson.

"If they want Moran's place, why don't they stand and fight? Or is there another flock coming?" Ruth asked.

The ranger said nothing while they covered another mile. "I don't know. It looks kind of funny to me. As if they sent that bunch in there—six or eight hundred—to kind of attract attention."

She twisted for a look at his face. "You mean they really intend seizing some other place? Such as the elbow of the creek, way back where all the ranches meet?"

He nodded. That or some similar strategy must have been decided upon by Dick Turner and Caulson. For he was convinced that serious as this clash tonight undoubtedly was, the main thousands of sheep were not here. Perhaps they were still up in the hills, or skirting them, being moved elsewhere. There was some obscure scheme behind this. Else Turner would not have permitted the sacrifice of probably several dozens of his animals.

Thundering horses forged out of the dark, seeming to come at them with the speed of arrows. Steele heard the challenge of the first rider, then while he was whipping out his gun, of the second. It was the unmistakable wheezing voice of Fleck.

"Wait!" he shouted. "Don't start—"

A shot drowned his words. There was a gasp from Ruth Walton. The bronk seemed to buckle under them. It had stepped in a hole or had taken that bullet in its body. Pitching forward, the animal struck its muzzle at the earth while its hind quarters lifted, throwing the two riders like stones from a slingshot.

Steele felt himself twirling through the air. He brought up with a hard blow to his head on the spot Fleck had struck him with the Colt butt last night on the stagecoach. Dazed and weak, Steele lay still.

His ears roared and it seemed difficult to open his eyes. In a vague, hazy way he thought of Ruth Walton, wondered about her. But for a long time he could not find strength to rise, and only lay waiting, his senses unsteady.

At last Steele crawled to his feet. He swayed clutching both hands to his head. Then he lurched forward, chancing to kick something. It was his

sombrero that he had kept during all of the tussles and excitement of the last two days. He halted to call hopefully:

"Ruth! Ruth Walton?"

There was no answer. Nor any sound except far in the distance, the rumble of small, sharp hoofs as the sheep swarmed away toward the black bulk of the Captian foothills.

"Ruth! Oh, Ruth!" he tried again.

No reply. Steele rubbed his head cautiously, and cautiously drew his sombrero down over the bump that was swelling to larger proportions. But he felt better now. He had not been injured, merely badly shaken up. And searching, he located the body of the bronk as it lay in death. Steele struck and cupped a match.

It was not a good thing to see. He sighed. Then he discovered the girl's large-size Stetson resting on its brim not far away, and picked it up. Again he called. Searched. But she was not here. She was gone.

Steele's apprehension became conviction. "They took her, all right. Fleck—and it would be Arizona with him. They were likely the pair Deputy Snow wanted for the general store robbery. They kidnapped Ruth—and what better hold could sheepmen get over the steer crowd?

CHAPTER VII

ARSON AT THE LOOP-CROSS

HE made yet another careful search of his surroundings but knew in advance that it was a mere empty gesture. Finally Steele paused to consider his own plight. He had no horse and it must be several miles to Fernvale's ranch even if he went the shortest way. But there was need of him there. And where else could he go?

Muttering curses at the rascally pair of toughs, he set out in the direction he thought correct. But it was difficult walking in high heeled boots intended for stirrup use, and made the more difficult by uneven ground that showed no trace of a trail.

It seemed an age that he walked. Steele met no one nor caught any further glimpse of the sheep. How that bold invasion tonight had turned out he could only guess, but he thought Deputy Snow, Fred Walton, and the others must have triumphed by dint of superior numbers.

The whirlwind sequence of clashes proved that there was urgent need of compromise, lest the two factions of stock raisers battle on until one or both were obliterated. Turner and Caulson were determined men. They had come to Indian Creek with their minds made up to graze sheep in the county. They had no intention of leaving.

At the same time the cattlemen were adamant. The parcels of land they owned outright were small and inconsequential to the struggle. To feed their stock they depended on thousands of acres that were part of the public domain, and by prior use they felt a certain extra-legal ownership of it. They were not going to yield this wire-grass covered range nor the hill-slopes their steers wandered in summer.

Steele rubbed his jaw troubledly. It was like dealing with the collision of two irresistible forces.

Yet there had to be a compromise. Blood-letting, the ranger hoped as he trudged along, must eventually pall on both sides. Walton, Moran, Beggs, and others of the ranchers must see that they were going to have to yield something. And Steele thought Turner and Caulson would welcome concessions

merely to obtain peace. As they owned most of the nine thousand sheep, the two men would make the decision on their side.

He was worried about Ruth. Hopefully as he trudged along Steele swept the range with alert eyes. But he caught no sign of her nor of the pair that had spirited her away. Thinking back and mentally testing the sound of that wheezy voice in his inner ear, he knew Fleck had been one of the men. His crony, Arizona, must have been the other.

Steele was forced to drop on the ground for a rest. Working off his riding boots, he massaged his feet beginning to pinch and sting from the unaccustomed exercise on high heels. For awhile he sat staring up at the sickle-moon that slowly edged westward. It was about one o'clock.

Drawing his boots on, he rose and resumed his walk. It was cool tonight and slightly damp. Meeting no one, he kept turning over in his mind this whole difficulty in Indian County. It would almost take a Philadelphia lawyer to puzzle the thing out for compromise. And as Steele could no longer prove himself an agent of Governor Maridale, what chance had he to effect a peace?

Chancing to look ahead he sucked breath sharply and came to an abrupt halt. Steele rubbed his eyes, then looked again. But there was no mistake. It was a reddish glow he saw far ahead, faint but seeming to deepen in hue.

And a reddish glow on the range meant but one thing.

Apprehension rose in his chest. Walking faster, he kept his gaze fixed on the red light. A groan escaped his lips.

"It's Jerry Fernvale's place. Some bunch of loboes must've set it afire. And Jerry was delirious: he must be in there!"

Steele broke into a run. But the pinch of his boots proved too much, and he was compelled to drop back to a rapid walk. He kept gritting his teeth, muttering curses while he stared ahead. The flames leaped higher into the sky, casting an eerie glow that could be seen now for miles.

He was worried about Jerry. Young Fernvale was not the kind to surrender. And unless it was to burn him alive, why should his house be set to the torch? Someone must have tried to capture Jerry. Failing, this was the fiendish trick resorted to.

As he drew nearer the ranger saw men running this way and that, their bodies silhouetted against the flames. A hundred yards away a group of saddle horses stared in alarm, motionless, their heads cocked and ears funnelled at the blaze. There were several men standing at the side of the building, watching.

MEANWHILE the blaze crept eagerly up the slant of the roof. Smoke rose into the night like a black shroud, pierced by licking tongues as the fire leaped up in triumph. The whole structure was of wood and tinder-dry; in half an hour it would be smoldering ashes.

Steele halted grinding his teeth at the sense of futility that gripped him. He was but one man against six or eight. But if Fernvale was in there—

Cutting a wide semi-circle, he slunk toward the freshly painted barn. Men kept walking around, exchanging comments and watching as if they expected the wounded owner of the place to come screaming out of that inferno. Clenching and unclenching his fists, Steele entered the barn and trotted through to its opposite door that stood

yawning open. He stopped there in shadow.

Three or four men were grouped ten yards away, their backs to the ranger. "See him yet?" he heard someone call from in front of the house.

"Not a sign, Moran. I reckon he's in there, though. You heard him holler at us to go to hell?"

"Jerry always had sand," growled another, kicking at the earth. "But there's limits, and a man oughta show sense!"

One of the men turned to face the group. "I tell you, boys, I don't like this business. It ain't the kind of thing I've ever been mixed in before and I got no stomach for it!"

"Now Fred, don't get worked up. We didn't start it, did we? There ain't anything we can do, is there? But if you ask me," the furry baritone notified, "it serves Fernvale right. Look how he turned colors on us. Settin' up with a sheep outfit is just about the worst thing a cowman could do!"

"Well I don't like it. If there was half a chance I'd go in there for him. But there ain't." He sighed. "There ain't a chance in the world for Fernvale!"

The objector, Steele realized suddenly, was Fred Walton. The 7-W owner kept pacing back and forth, darting harassed glances at the house. He started as a low rumble came from the burning structure. With a roar the roof collapsed, showering vivid red sparks, and a great black mushroom of smoke belched skyward. Flames gnawed through, fought higher, and the yard was more vividly alight than before.

The four men watched in silence. At last Ruth Walton's father mused regretfully: "I reckon Steele came to my place to snatch her, all right. And Jerry was sure with him, maybe waitin' out in the yard."

He shook his head. "Seems like there's no other way about it. Couldn't have been money they were after. I never keep much cash. Steele, the skunk, just made a mistake and got in my room. Gave me a cock-and-bull story about bein' a special ranger for Governor Maridale."

"Sure he wasn't, Fred?" Moran asked, but in a tone that proved his own skepticism.

Walton shrugged. "The letter he showed me had the state capitol print on it and all that. But his story sounded weak. Fernvale must have seen Jonah Snow ride up and gone and hid himself. Prob'ly met Ruth while we still had Steele. The two of them took her away. Ruth wouldn't have gone of her own free will without a word to me."

Again they were silent. Walton drifted off toward another group of men. One of those remaining watched his retreating back as he said: "Boys, Fred is gettin' soft. Gettin' so he ain't sure about anything. He liked Jerry, and I guess that's the cause of it. But if I meet them kidnappers—"

He did not finish, but his nervous movement straighter carried his meaning. The man at his elbow nodded, his face obscured in the dark. "Me, too, Beggs. I'll take it on myself to cut 'em down, both them skunks!"

Steele waited puzzledly to hear more, but the trio wandered away. Standing there, he reviewed the talk, trying to get the fullest meaning and information out of it. Absently he rubbed his bronzed jaw as he stared with squinted eyes at the fire.

AT any rate, they had trapped Fernvale here and they blamed Steele and Jerry for kidnapping Ruth

Walton. Their assumption must be that since the blaze started, Steele had got away with the girl while for some reason Jerry was left behind, trapped. They all agreed that Fernvale was in the house.

The ranger's lips twisted bitterly. "Cremated by now. He's sure cremated!"

His fists clenched. There was a glint in his eyes that was not good to see. At last he roused himself and walked back through the barn. Then remembering that he was afoot, he went cautiously across the open space to the corral, and crept around its juniper bars until he could see the ranchers' horses. If there had been a man told to guard them he was nowhere in evidence.

It was a simple matter to walk up to the nearest horse, throw reins over its ears, and cautiously lead the animal away. Once behind the corral again Steele toed a stirrup and swung his weight into the saddle. He urged the horse forward, heading toward the distant cottonwood line of Indian Creek that traversed the greater part of the county.

Suddenly exclamations rose behind him. Steele paused and twisting in his saddle, stared back. There was a movement among the horses; then cries followed by the thud of hoofs revealed that the theft of one animal had been discovered.

With a low growl the ranger faced front and put his mustang to a sharp run. As he fled toward the creek shots crackled in his wake. But it was doubtful if the men could even see him.

He came to the dark shadows of the tall, calm trees and waited. Hearing nothing he started on; then abruptly a rush of hoofbeats seemed to come as out of nowhere, and he saw a dark blot a quarter-mile off sweeping straight at him. Steele forced his mustang into the cold running waters of the creek. His first intention was to cross; but on second thought he headed his mount against the current.

They went splashing around turns and twists in the shallow, rapid stream. Now and again Steele slowed and stood upright in the stirrups, listening. A grimace crossed his face. "They ain't trailin' me. Reckon they're stumped just where this hoss went."

But he had a sense of desolation, as if the world had suddenly turned hostile toward him. The possibility of making peace between the two camps seemed more and more remote. And whatever happened, Fernvale, Sheriff Roddy, Steve Price, and several others could not be brought back. Those deaths made too great a cost for a few thousand acres of range.

"Ruth's goin' to be broken hearted," he muttered sadly. "She never stopped carin' for Jerry. I don't think girls stop just because of a fuss about sheep and cattle."

It was a sorry mess. But the uselessness and savagery of cremating a man in his own house . . . Steele drew a long breath, brows knit, eyes sparkling like hoar frost on a Fall morning. He felt almost a savage hate toward ranchers and sheepmen alike.

Pausing, he let his horse wet its lips in the stream. But an unusual splashing a few yards away made him stiffen quickly. And as he reached for the sixgun recovered after the horse had been shot under him by Fleck, he heard a man grunt as if straining to great effort.

Steele listened, rigid. His eyes discovered a dark form moving at the bank a short distance ahead. He urged the mustang forward. "Hold on, there! Stand straight and get your hands up!"

It brought a gasp of surprise. Steele levelled his gun at the figure and kneed his horse closer. As he did so the other deliberately floundered up the bank until he could throw both arms around a tree for support. He hung there weakly.

Steele drove his horse up the bank, where he swung from his saddle, his gun ready. He leaned for a sharply intent look into the wet, hair-plastered countenance with glowing eyes that met his.

"Steele!"

Flash stepped back. "Gosh it can't be—Jerry!"

The other sat down hard. Jamming his sixgun back into its holster Steele dropped on his knees. "I thought you were burnt up in your house!"

Fernvale had a flask in his fist. While he stared blearily at Steele he worked to get the cork out. "No. They—thought so too, I reckon. Dunno just how I got out. It was like a furnace in hell! Think I came by a window: ain't even sure. I remember hidin' beside the cookshed for a long time."

He tilted the flask for a long swallow. Then he offered it to the ranger, who shook his head. Jerry corked and returned the bottle to his pocket. "I don't often use the stuff. But gosh," he sighed, "I'm tuckered. I'm plumb tuckered!"

Steele drew tobacco and papers from his pocket. His eyes still fixed on Fernvale, he began to build a smoke. "Tell me all you can think of," he urged, impatient to know details. "Who set the house goin' and why?"

"Arizona and Fleck. They—"

"Not them! Did they have Ruth with 'em?"

"Yes. I didn't see her but she screamed to me. But I'll start at the beginnin'. After you left, Jimmie Duggan rode in. He's my whole payroll on the Loop-Cross. Jimmie knew Doc Preston would be over to the Kellog place, so he went and fetched him. Doc got the bullet out and trussed my hip real firm. Said it would heal but that I've lost some blood and I better go easy for awhile."

HE drew a breath. "Jimmie left again on account of my stock. The Doc and everything else had tired me, and I slept on the living room sofa quite some time. Woke up to hear the front door squeak. I grabbed for my gun and asked who it was. Fleck, I knew, from that wheeze of his. We both shot. I guess I pinked him, and he ran outside. Talked awhile with his partner, Arizona. Them two are closer'n cement. Ruth hollered for me to look out—that's how I knew she was there. She must have been roped on a hoss that was hitched. We 'changed lead some more. But they wouldn't show themselves. Then I heard 'em go, and awhile later I smelled smoke."

He mopped his sodden sleeve over his forehead. "They'd set two fires. I fought 'em but they got away from me. You can't carry enough water in buckets when a fire is really started. I worked at it till I heard a lot of hosses bearin' down. It was Fred Walton, Moran, Beggs, Colville—all them. They yelled for me to surrender but I knew right off they blamed me for Ruth bein' kidnapped. They weren't in a reasonin' mood, you bet! So I ducked in the house."

He gestured widely. "That's about all."

Steele lighted his cigarette and as he watched Fernvale's face in the matchlight, nodded sympathetically. "You sure been hauled through the wringer, Jerry. And now you got Ruth to fret about, eh?"

"I'm worried plenty about her! And a lot more too."

"What do you mean, more?"

"Why, Uncle Jeff wouldn't stand for kidnappin'. 'Specially not a girl I'm—er, fond of. Nor Dick Turner: he ain't that kind. It wasn't done on their orders, Flash. And it's queer Uncle Jeff didn't come lookin' for me today or tonight. 'Specially after you and I left his sheep camp so sudden. There's only one reason Jeff didn't come. He couldn't."

Steele looked like a man slowly finding a great light. "Go on?"

Fernvale leaned and tapped his arm significantly. "Flash, they grabbed Ruth to use her for bargainin' with the cowmen. The ransom for her is goin' to be land. Land for sheep. Well, but Arizona and Fleck and Scar Dillon: do they own sheep?"

"You mean they'll get control of the sheep, though, and it's as good as ownin' 'em when—"

"When Turner and Caulson have been murdered! You betcha, Flash. That's their scheme!"

CHAPTER VIII

RANGER'S AMBUSH

IT was dusk in the foothills of the sprawling, somber Captian Mountains. The evening star shone like a tiny diamond high in the slate-blue sky streaked orange and yellow and shot with red in a field of color around the sinking sun. The two riders halted their horses, exchanged rueful, almost discouraged looks through the half-light, and slowly, wearily dismounted.

Steele and Fernvale's all day search had brought no result. Last night they had rested, and skulking back to the Loop-Cross ranch in early morning, obtained fresh horses. The ranch house was a grey, irregular mound of ashes from which wisps of smoke still curled mournfully. But there was food stored in a cyclone cellar from which they had made out a breakfast and two meals since.

Careful not to meet the groups of cattlemen and cowboys that searched earnestly for the kidnappers of Ruth Walton, the ranger and Fernvale had searched likewise but found no better result. As if the earth had yawned and gulped them into its depths, the sheep thieves had vanished.

The bulk of the nine thousand sheep were pocketed now in a foothill valley, carefully attended by five men and several alert dogs. But Fleck and Arizona were not with them. And the two searchers could learn nothing from the talk of the shepherds as to their whereabouts, nor the whereabouts of Dick Turner and Uncle Jeff Caulson.

Jerry wore a look of discouragement. He was none too comfortable with his tightly bandaged hip but he insisted upon maintaining Steele's pace. Dismounting now, he leaned back against his horse idly building a smoke, his eyes fixed absently on a tree trunk nearby. Steele swung from his saddle and loosened the cinch to rest the bronk. He riffled lean fingers through his shock of tow-colored hair, scowling as for the fiftieth time he tried to guess where the kidnappers of Ruth might be.

The hills were vast!

He was thinking the whole matter through once more as he took the tobacco sack from Fernvale and began to build his own smoke. Jerry was wanted by the cattlemen—if they were aware that he still lived. There was the Steve Price killing charged against him and his uncle. There was Jerry's alleged betrayal of steer raisers that made them all bitter.

Ruth Walton, on the other hand, was anathema to the sheep crowd because she was the daughter of the leading beef raiser of Indian County. So Steele had a single connection on each side of the fight.

And he had only these two, one kidnapped, the other law-wanted. There was no influence he could call on for assistance. To settle the struggle for land there was no neutral in the section except the special ranger sent here by the state's chief executive. And he himself was between the two fires, distrusted and unwanted by each side.

Jerry lifted his bootheel to strike a match. But he did not strike it: he poised like a statue. His head swung quickly toward Steele and their eyes met with sudden significance. The match went out. Hurriedly Steele dropped his rice paper stuffed with tobacco flakes and thrust the sack into his shirt pocket. Fernvale cocked his head, listening. They dragged their mounts deeper into a forest of pine and spruce.

The clop-clop of horses became louder. Voices rumbled to them. Then they could see indistinctly a heavy-set man swim past along the narrow trail close before them. Steele and Fernvale clasped their hands over the muzzles of their horses lest they whinny and reveal the presence of the hidden men. Staring, they found two riders coming behind the leader. They were abreast, straight and stiff in their saddles like men tied. And following them closely, two more guards.

Steele waited until the five had gone on. He stepped forward to clutch Fernvale's arm. "Turner and Caulson!"

"They're stoppin'. Hold on—listen, Flash!"

They held their breath. The squeak of leather carried to them, then blurred talk among the three captors. The leader was certainly Scar Dillon, the pock-faced man who rode the Indian Creek stage that night to hold its passengers at bay until his sheep-dealing companions halted the driver. One of the trailing men Steele thought to be Dutch, and the other was named Abel Crow.

"—plenty of drop here," Dillon decided. "Let's shove 'em over and get it done with. Nobody'll ever see 'em way down in that cut, not even their skeletons. They just disappear, which is what Fleck wants. Then he won't even need a bill o' sale for them sheep. Who's gonna say they ain't his and these hombres didn't leave the country?"

"Well, what're you gassin' about?" Dutch demanded. "Get it over with!"

STEELE and Fernvale stole forward. They could see the twenty-five foot clearing that was bounded opposite them by an irregular shale precipice. It was an eighty foot drop, with red rocks, a thin creek bed, and rough shrubs tangled below, never visited by man. Chancing detection, they scurried across the trail to the protection of a big boulder. As they went, they caught sight of the trio removing stirrup bonds of their prisoners.

Leather creaked again. Their elbows lashed across their backs, Turner and Caulson were dismounting. "Now look here, Scar," Turner said persuasively, "what's it goin' to get you, killin' us? It's murder, and murder always gets found out. Jeff and I—"

"Hustle 'em to the edge!" Dillon interrupted roughly. "Your talkin' days are over, gents. Two minutes and you'll be buzzard meat, so get set for it. No hard feelin's, Dick," he taunted.

"But we can't have you around; got plenty on our hands as it is. You ready, boys? Keep your guns in their backs!"

"Yeah," Crow growled. He stood behind Turner, gripping his shoulder and ready to hurl the man forward over the cliff.

"Can't get their arms loose, can they?"

"No. And they won't need to after they hit those rocks!"

Scar Dillon grunted in satisfaction. "I'll count so they go together. You ready, Dutch? All right, when I say 'three' heave 'em as hard as you can.

"One!" he pronounced. Then waited. The two of his henchmen were crouched and ready.

"Two!"

A sixgun pounded behind the boulder. Dillon staggered, grabbing his thigh. Two men dashed out. Startled and confused, the three whipped around snarling curses. Dillon's eyes clashed with the glinting, dangerous eyes of Jerry Fernvale. The man Dutch leaped away from Dick Turner, aiming his forty-five.

Steele shot first. Dutch's gun exploded close after. The man uttered no sound but a look of dismay swept over his round face. He toppled backward, tripped, and went down with a thump.

He was dead.

Quickwittedly the helpless Turner and Caulson flung themselves flat on the ground. Crow was shooting again and again. His bullets shrieked past the moving target of the ranger. Meanwhile Fernvale had pumped two more accurate slugs into the moaning, drooling Scar Dillon. Swinging around as Dillon collapsed with a last howl, Jerry saw the danger Steele was in—that he could not turn and aim swiftly enough to miss death at the hand of Crow when the tough's gun flamed next.

Jerry's forty-five roared. Crow leaped, yowling with pain. His aim spoiled, he fired into the darkening sky as he hit earth. His knees bent. He tottered, striving to regain balance, clutching high at his chest where he was hit.

Steele plunged forward to save the man from the precipice edge. But with desperate effort Crow tried to raise his gun once more and the ranger dodged sideways. Crow's footing gave way. A terrified yell burst from his lips. There was a crackling of overburdened shale . . .

As if he had been wiped from the earth by some invisible hand, Crow vanished.

They waited, tense as statues. There came a low, far-away thump.

The deep gulf of silence lasted thirty seconds. Steele drew a long breath as, turning away, he shifted his sixgun and mopped a sleeve over his forehead. His eyes found Turner and Caulson just struggling awkwardly to their feet, both pale and shaky.

Jerry Fernvale rushed toward them. "Uncle Jeff, you all right? Here, I'll get those ropes off!"

IT was accomplished in a moment. Massaging their arms, the men eyed their rescuers with grave, tense expressions. Forcing down the awed lump in his thoat Turner spoke shakily. "Boys, you—you sure didn't get here none too soon!"

He sucked breath, recognizing Steele. "What the hell you—"

"Hold on! We've got no time to argue, Turner. Fleck and Arizona have got Ruth Walton somewhere—kidnapped. And they've grabbed your sheep; isn't that right? And they're meanin'—"

"Sure! Gonna ransom the girl for range. But they ain't intendin'," Caulson panted, "to keep the bargain with her father after they make it. They won't let her go, really."

"What do you mean?"

"Just a minute!" Turner swung pugnaciously at Steele again. "I'm sure obliged for what you just done. But I don't know how you and Jeff and me can have any business. Who the devil are you anyhow, mister?"

He hitched his belt, a grim smile curling the corners of his lips. "A ranger."

Both men uttered exclamations.

"Ranger!" Jerry cried, amazed.

"You ain't wearin' no badge. How do we know you're a ranger?" Dick Turner demanded.

"You know because I say so. I work undercover. I had a letter from the Governor but I was fool enough to show it to Fred Walton at the 7-W. And he tore it up.

"But look here," he hurried on, "we're wastin' valuable time! What's the diff just now what I am? You were goin' to say what about Ruth Walton?"

The pair exchanged significant looks. Caulson scowled at Jerry and put a hand on his shoulder. "Grip yourself, son. Why—Fleck's plannin' to force her to marry him. That way, even after he trades the girl for a big slice of range, he's still got an awful hold on her. Disgrace! He'll make her father buy him off again and again. He figures—"

Fernvale seized his uncle's arms, trying to shake the heavy-set man. "Where are they? Don't talk a lot of foolishness! Where is she? We've got to get there!"

It was sound argument, common sense. As if in mutual consent the four turned and scattered for mounts. Turner and Caulson captured the animals they had come on as prisoners. Steele and Fernvale ran back across the clearing to the place they had left their horses.

The men gathered on the narrow trail. "Can you find those loboes' camp?" Steele questioned anxiously.

DICK TURNER spurred his horse and it plunged away in the night. "We'll find 'em! We ain't lived all these years without knowin' how to back-track our own way!"

As they fell in single file, going as fast as the tortuous trail permitted, Steele heard Fernvale close behind him cursing and grinding his teeth. Steele felt rage almost to the boiling point himself at thought of what the scoundrels intended. His fists clenched, he stared straight ahead at Turner and Caulson. All four realized keenly what Ruth's fate might be if they failed to locate the camp. And in time. "Faster!" Jerry urged. "Can't you go faster? How much farther is it?"

They did not reply. The four rode down long slopes carpeted with grass that abruptly became timbered and black. It was night now with the same sickle-moon lifting in the eastern sky. Night, with stars strewn like diamond dust across the deep cloudless blue. But to Steele the very air and the stars and moon seemed of a sudden to have a foreboding note. More and more boreboding with the insistent accompaniment of crunching leather, the rapid hoof-tattoo of loping horses.

Several miles from their meeting place Turner drew rein. "Listen, Jeff," he called in a guarded tone. "We're on the right track and all that. But what about Colville and Walton?"

Steele edged his horse nearer. "What do you mean?"

Caulson gave a low whistle. "That's so! See, they kept us right in the

shack and talked reckless, thinkin' we were goin' to die anyhow and couldn't tell. You know Colville—rides for the Bent Fork?"

"Hurry!" Fernvale shot a look at Turner who was fumbling to get his watch out and striking a match in his other hand.

"Well, Colville is in the gang—stringin' along with Arizona and Fleck. They sent him to Fred Walton with a ransom note. Colville was to claim he found it. It gives directions how to get Ruth back. Tells Walton to come up in the hills and to bring Moran of the Bent Fork. Nobody else, and be at a certain place at nine. I mean, Colville will be with 'em, and as soon as they get in the hills he'll let out what he really is. Make both of 'em blindfold—

"Dick," he broke off, "what time is it?"

Turner jammed the watch back in his pocket. "They're due any minute, Jeff, 'cordin' to what we heard!"

CHAPTER IX

LEAD SETTLEMENT

STEELE thought fast. He saw how Fernvale fidgeted, and knew that every moment of delay was torture to him, worried as he was about Ruth. The ranger leaned toward Caulson.

"You two have guns now. You'd better hide here and wait for Colville to bring Walton and Moran along. Walton's certain to come. It'll sound risky to him and he'll be lookin' for some trick. But a father will take any chance to help his girl. Give Colville a chance to surrender—but if he don't, mow him down. These hombres are mad dogs!"

The others nodded, fingering the weapons they had taken from Dutch and Scar Dillon. "We'll get Walton away, don't worry. Where you goin', on to the camp?"

"Tell us where it is."

Steele listened intently while Turner gave hurried direction as best he could, corrected in a few details by Jeff Caulson. There was a final moment of conference; then with Fernvale riding eagerly ahead the ranger gestured farewell to the two sheepmen and urged his horse along the trail.

They rode two miles, as closely as they could calculate that distance. Obeying Turner's injunction, they pulled their horses to a halt then and swung from leather. For a moment both men stood listening, trying to pierce the darkness about them.

"Looks like a gully," Steele said, pointing. "That's what Turner said to hunt for."

Fernvale plunged forward at once. The ranger hurried after and seized his arm. "Wait, Jerry. A minute won't matter much, and we can't afford to be nabbed. They might have guards out."

The Loop-Cross owner swallowed hard. He had his forty-five tightly clenched in his fist and he kept brushing his left hand down its muzzle in a gesture almost caressing. He strained to release Steele's hold, then suddenly relaxed.

"You're right, Flash. I—I'm on edge is all. You go first."

Steele moved past him. He led the way down the slope and into a gully that ran back between two hills. There were trees along the route and patches of high shrubs. The grass in the v-like center of the cut was slightly soggy underfoot. Steele climbed slowly in the gully bed, ready for action on a moment's notice. But there was no hail nor sight of any human.

The gully widened. They continued until Steele halted so abruptly that Fernvale scuffed his heel. Flash raised a hand in warning. They both stared at yellow lights fifty yards away, up one slope and among trees.

Presently they went on, but with caution redoubled. Mounting ten yards of the slope they prowled from tree to tree. As they neared the remote cabin the low drone of voices floated to them on the still air.

The ranger advanced within thirty yards and halted again. Without exchanging words the two held another conference. The sign language brought agreement, and they separated, Steele going in an arc behind the rickety-looking log shack that might at one time have sheltered a prospector. Fernvale vanished in the dark to circle around the far side.

As he went Flash heard the stomp of horses. He placed them behind the cabin and nodded, his eyes slitted. A change in his course brought him at last to the small clearing where five animals were tethered, the saddles and bridles heaped nearby on the ground. Methodically Steele loosened each horse, gave it a slap on the rump, and sent it off into darkness.

That insured that Fleck and his scoundrels weren't going to escape very far, whatever happened.

Steele broke his sixgun and fingered the caps of his cartridges. Snapping the weapon shut, he hitched his corduroy trousers and re-set the jacket that hung from his wide sloping shoulders. Then he crept toward the cabin.

Voices came louder to him. That of Arizona, particularly bass and timbrous, was easily recognizable. Steele started when a contralto floated out. It was Ruth Walton. She was angry, seemed to be struggling with someone.

Suddenly a door squeaked on rusty hinges. A man padded outside and made a slow circle of the cabin. "Anything doin', Gus?"

"No."

But he paused for some time before he went back within. Steele moved up under the rear opening that served for a window, and cautiously straightened. Keeping his face back from the light he strained on tiptoe to stare in.

"—ought to be back," Fleck complained in his asthmatic wheeze. "Scar wouldn't need all night to shove them two over!"

THERE was a gasp from the girl. "Oh! You mean—you've murdered my father!"

"No, no! Why we ain't gonna do that—not if you got sense. Dillon's on another job. Here, Ruth, let's you and me get together. You know Dan Colville's sworn in as a special deputy: And them fellers can marry. They—"

"They can't! It's ridiculous! And if they could, don't speak to me of marriage. It's impossible! I wouldn't marry you for anything. Do you hear?"

Steele saw the massive head of Arizona as the man reached out angrily. He grabbed her shoulder and hurled her across the oblong cabin. Arizona muttered a raucous laugh that accompanied the girl's cry of alarm. She went spinning hard against Fleck, who guffawed as he clasped her in his arms.

She struggled valiantly, beating her fists at his reddish stubbled face, kicking at his shins. Fleck only clutched her harder. Until at last, with the air almost forced from her lungs, she hung limp and gasping in his arms. Fleck stared down at her with eyes that gleamed cat-like in the yellow light of a hazy oil lamp.

"Listen, you. Your father's on the way here. Do you want to see him?"

She raised her head. "Yes. Yes, please!"

Fleck nodded without change of expression. "Then keep quiet. You and me are goin' to get married soon as Colville comes. If you refuse—" He sucked breath, his look becoming fierce. "Why if you don't do it your father won't get here. That's all. He sure won't come alive!"

He threw her away from him suddenly and she reeled out of Steele's vision. He heard her strike the wall, whimpering. Fleck strode to the middle of the cabin, hands on his hips. He was glaring at her.

"You think I can take chances? I want your father here same as you do. Aim to trade you for some of his and Moran's range. They've got plenty. Or they better get it for me! But he'd go back on the bargain so I will too—first. There's one way to hold him, and it's to marry you!"

He leered at the others. " 'Sides, I'd be willin' any time. Eh, boys?"

"Fleck!"

The brittle summons jerked them rigid, sucking breath sharply. As one man the four who were in the cabin swept hands to their guns. There was a whisk of someone's arms; the oil lamp skimmed from the slab table to smash in a million bits on the hard puncheon floor. At the same instant that the cabin blotted, the front door hinges squeaked again.

Two shots roared. A third. There was a cry of pain—

From Jerry Fernvale. Then silence.

Steele picked his way hurriedly along the side of the cabin. He came to an abrupt halt. Something warned him—an inner voice that whispered of foolhardiness and rife danger.

But Fernvale lay ahead in the dark, writhing in pain . . . . "Ruth!" he he gasped out. "Ruth, I—"

His words thinned away. It shot a thrill through Steele, a thrill of pity for Jerry and of hate for those inside the cabin. Terrible hate, cold hate. He was alone now against the toughs. Impetuousness had kept Jerry from waiting as they had agreed. Steele was alone and he had to wreak revenge, had to get Ruth out—make a lead settlement for everything!

HE peered around the corner of the shack. The four came out cautiously. But as they heard no one they became convinced there had been only one man. "Cripes!" Arizona ejaculated. He knelt, a match glowing in his cupped hand. "It's young Fernvale, all right. Then he didn't burn!"

"Fleck!"

For the second time the men froze. Fleck released the girl. His hands dropped to his sides. Uncertain at the new threat, he stepped cautiously down from the threshold. Steele, straight and six feet tall, loomed out from the corner of the cabin.

"Cover 'em, boys! Kill the first man that moves!"

He called it out boldly, as if half a dozen men backed him, shielded in the shadows around the front of the cabin. And by the starlight and the pallor of the sickle-moon, he could make certain that all four of the sheepmen believed.

They saw Steele. They twitched, peering furtively beyond him into the dark. "Remember, boys—kill 'em if they grab for guns!"

The ranger took another step nearer. Another. They saw the dull glint of his blue-barreled Colt. Obediently their hands started toward their shoulders.

"Ruth, come out! Get Fleck's—"

"You won't!" Fleck wheezed—and drew. And fired.

Steele's forty-five kicked in his fist. The crash blended with the roar of Fleck's weapon. The man's draw was lightning fast, smooth as pouring oil. And the bullet that spat from his gun was accurate. It struck the ranger above the knee like a club.

He forgot himself, lost his habitual being in a wild, ungovernable lust. He jerked back knowing the other three were whipping out their guns. Their volley came with Fleck's next shot. But they misplaced Steele and he went unhurt.

His Colt exploded. It brought a gulp from the fourth man, whom Steele did not know. It sent the fellow staggering. There was more lead—jets of fire—the shock of bullets smashing into wood. Screams from Willard. Screams in a different tone, higher, that became muffled as Ruth Walton leaped at Fleck from behind.

The odds were so heavily against Steele. But he kept circling, hoping, fighting.

A form loomed. Lunged, and struck him. Arizona brought his gun muzzle sweeping lower. In the collision Steele lost his hold on his own weapon. Maddeningly it dropped on his booted toe and was gone. But he was quick enough to knock Arizona's gun upward and sideways. A gush of crimson came from its maw. The heat warmed Steele's head as the bullet ripped through his sombrero crown.

Another man stamped near. Willard ducked an out-flung hand of the ranger's for his gun. Steele broke from Arizona. He glimpsed Ruth still grittily clinging, struggling, kicking at Fleck. He glanced back as his fist doubled and rose. It took Arizona on the point of the jaw, not squarely but grazing it.

Teeth clicked. A bellow was swallowed by the man. His Colt discharged off to one side. The next instant Steele had bounded hard against Arizona and was twisting, ripping the weapon from him.

He got it. He tried to dodge a terrific swing but it smashed against his ear with a loud report in his brain. The blow staggered him. Still holding the gun, he reeled against Willard, reached around automatically to encircle the man's body. Willard, about to shoot, was for the moment unable to.

ARIZONA lunged after. Steele released Willard and leaped aside groggily. The two others struck together. Willard's Colt blazed its shot at close quarters, burning flesh, driving lead into the chest of Arizona.

That meant one enemy less. Dazed and stumbling, clutching his head, Steele tried to clear his senses. He knew that Fleck was manhandling the girl to use her for a shield. It enraged him, burned him inside; but he could not yet fully control himself. But staggering, he crossed part of the space toward the cabin door. Fleck, changing plans, with a final, brutal smash to her shoulder knocked Ruth backward. She went over the threshold to alight half inside the cabin with a thud. Fleck turned to Steele.

The two leaped. They slammed together in mid-stride. They were within an inch of the same height. Fleck was heavier of build but not so rapier-fast. But he was savage with the savagery of a man who sees his diabolical plans smashing. And his dark, glowing eyes gave clear intention.

He was on the kill.

They went down. The jar shook both. In a way it seemed to clear Steele's senses, made him sure where

Fleck's fleshy face was. And he drove a short punch at it that landed square on one cheek. Swept his other hand down on the contested forty-five as they rolled apart. They fought for that like fierce mongrels over a bone.

They clinched. They smashed back to the cabin wall. Steele tripped Fleck. As the fellow sagged, he grabbed the gun wrist with both hands, lifted, jerked it sideways. Fleck kneed him in the groin—and Steele fell away with a low moan.

The other lunged. The gun exploded. Its bullet scooped flesh from Steele's shoulder. Fleck fell on the ranger and again they were like tangling mountain cats. The gun slipped between their hands and somehow received abrupt impetus to twirl away. Explosions, yells, stomping was all about them. The pair didn't hear as they fought to the death.

It was Fleck's death. He whipped out a knife as if by some legerdemain he had created it there in his hand. But as he raised it, meanwhile lifting from Steele's chest, the ranger caught at the wrist. He knocked it back and the point of the knife went into Fleck's throat.

THE gurgling scream reached through Steele, into the recesses of his heart. Fleck toppled heavily on him and there was warm liquid oozing onto the ranger's powder-burned cheek. With distaste he lifted and shoved so that the big sheepman tumbled onto his side on the ground. Steele lay still, panting, soaked with perspiration.

Someone crouched over him. "Steele!" Fred Walton ejaculated. Then: "Where's my girl? Where is she?"

"Dad—here."

The voice came faintly. Walton leaped to his feet. He vanished, and another form came beside Steele. This was Moran of the Bent Fork, his jowls heavy and dark. He rasped a match on his trousers and held it while the flame climbed.

"Can you wait? Fernvale's hit."

"Y-yes," Steele panted. "Then—it's all right?"

"What? Well, there won't be no more fightin'. On the way here we heard shots that sounded like Turner and Caulson must've met Deputy Snow. We told 'em where to meet him, see. Snow came with Colville and Walton and me to a certain place. He left us. We went on and we met those two sheepmen. Turner and Caulson stepped out, almost plugged us when we—

"But never mind," Moran rushed on. "Point is, they went to get Snow's help to get their sheep back. Can you wait?" he asked again.

"Go on. Take care of Jerry. I'm not —hit so bad."

He waited ten minutes. Then several riders clattered up the gully, leaped from their horses, and ran forward. One asked for Steele. Moran pointed to him.

The sharp-chinned Jonah Snow dropped beside Flash. "Listen," he breathed, "you're a ranger all right. I wired Maridale. Here, lemme see what I can do."

"First find out if Ruth Walton is all right, Snow."

The officer sprang up and dashed into the cabin. Presently he came back accompanied by Fred Walton and the girl. Ruth called for water and a pail was brought. She had got cloths from somewhere and in a methodical way prepared to minister to the ranger.

"Sorry about that, uh—letter," Walton stammered apologetically.

"It's all right. Listen, please. Turner

and Caulson did you a good turn tonight. If it wasn't for them something mighty unpleasant would sure have happened to Ruth. I wish, Walton, you'd swallow your usual ideas about sheepmen. You're using free range—state owned land. Sheep men are citizens too. Now I don't ask that you give up everything. Just that you'll agree to a compromise."

The 7-W owner molded his hands. He blinked, lips pursed. "Dammit, Steele, I never thought the day would come when I'd even talk with sheepmen! But—Well, I'll do it. I reckon we got some on our side that ain't been like they should. Colville. And Jonah Snow says Latigo Simons from my own spread is hand-in-glove with the sheepmen. I'll do it!"

"You won't regret it. Turner and Caulson are first-rate men. Oh Deputy." He turned his head to meet Snow's eyes. "Fernvale and I overheard a sort of confession by the two gents who ambushed Steve Price and murdered him. They were Fleck and Arizona."

"That so!" He scowled, glancing away. "Gosh darn it, Ranger, they're both dead. Well, that's that."

Steele reached out to catch Ruth's wrist. She gazed at him. He lifted himself slightly and grinned a rueful, urgent grin. "Go take care of Jerry. He wants everything put right between you. If it's any comfort, Walton," he assured her father, "Jerry never was for sheep. But Caulson is his uncle and years ago Caulson did a lot for him."

"I guess it's pretty well settled, then. There's room for sheep and beef in this country. Lots of room."

"Say Ranger, you got to rest a couple weeks. After that why not get yourself somethin' around here? Indian County's the place for a man," Snow enthused. "Growin' every day. Progressive and everything!"

Steele relaxed full length on the ground. "Indian County looks fine. But I reckon when I'm shipshape again there'll be orders."

"Orders?" Walton asked.

Flash Steele grinned as best he could grin for the bruises on his face. "Orders to go somewhere, look into somethin'. Trouble, more or less. And when those orders come I'll be set, 'cause a feller always wonders what there is over the next hill!"

If you liked this "Flash Steele" story you'll want to know that only in "Wild West Stories and Complete Novel Magazine" you may read about him. There'll be another fast moving "Flash Steele" novel in the January issue, on sale November 20th!

You take a chance

WHEN YOU BUY THE unknown

● Why risk money on unknown razor blades? Probak Jr., product of the world's largest blade maker, "stands up" for many smooth, clean shaves—sells at 10¢ for 4 blades! Buy a package today and enjoy a tip-top shave tomorrow.

PROBAK JUNIOR

Red Rodeo

A Baffling Mystery of the Sinister Influence Which Followed a Rodeo, Leaving Death and Devastation in its Wake

By James P. Olsen

"AN' don't you forget," Sugrue heatedly warned Van Farney, "that the part you hold won't do you no good when you're *dead!*"

Van Farney's face showed stubbornness, for all that his was a bad situation. These men—these three facing him—had killed. He wasted no time doubting they would do so again. Van Farney gestured, looking worried and harassed. When he spoke, his voice was all tight, heavy with emotion.

"Nothin' will happen to me," he said. "You need two parts to make your puzzle complete. Even—even *me*, I wouldn't fill it out. You've got to have Chignan."

Tall, trap-jawed, Sugrue swore feelingly. He fumbled with the dangling ends of the rawhide thong that held his hat tight to his head. He seemed to treasure that hat, and the horsehair band with the buckle of Mexican silverwork. The buckle was very old. The horsehair band not so old. It was the kind of band the prisoners in Huntsville learned to make.

Tunsall, thin-faced, i r r i t a b l e, shrugged toward Sugrue. "A good *accident* is what he needs," he argued, almost as though Van Farney were not present. He looked toward the third man, Ankers. Ankers, deliberate, deep-eyed, his face a mask of cruelty, slowly shook his head.

"There's other ways," he grunted. "Our time'll come. When it does, he'll give up head. He'll give us what we want, an' he'll tell us where Chignan is. Chignan! The only one who didn't do time; an' he's playin' with this fuzz-faced button here!"

It was a tense moment; death ready to mount into an odd and paradoxically gay setting. Life teemed jubilantly about them. In the pens, outlaw horses snorted and steers bawled. Over in the big grandstands, flags fluttered in the light breeze; stands that were jammed with men and women in holiday clothing: Tourists, rangemen, townsmen—all gathered to make a three-day success of the Salrios Rodeo. While over here by the chutes, Death's black drab shadowed a day damned with threat.

Sugrue leaned close to Van Farney. Closer still. Strolling from back of the horse pens, almost *too* casually, came another man near Van Farney's age. He was whistling tonelessly, carelessly, yet his manner was that of one who has stealthily learned something to his extreme liking.

It was a Roman Race—cowhands running horses two abreast. One foot on the back of one horse and one on the other, they stood. Something, some forewarning of dire, threatening disaster jerked Rainy's nerves.

"Van," he said, stopping scant feet away and rocking back and forth on high heels. "Van, yuh need help, amigo?"

The ominous tautness gained slack. Sugrue jerked his head toward the newcomer. "Little wildhoss champion!" he softly jeered. "Why don't-cha look for help for yourself? *You'll* be needing it *too!*"

Del Givens, who was whipcord slender where his friend Van was stocky, shook his head slowly, aggravatingly. His eyes went sideways, back toward the stock pens beyond the saddling-starting chutes. "Why no," he softly breathed. "Not today."

A band blared brassy notes from direction of the grandstand. A meaning glance passed between Sugrue, Tunstall, and Ankers. They drifted away. Sugrue hobbled across the infield, climbed the rail, walked across the race track and was lost to sight in the pack of exhibitionists, judges and contestants milling there.

Van drew a heavy breath. "I don't like it, Del—y' gettin' boogered down in this mess. They ain't nothin'—*nothin'* them three won't do. Y' got too much at stake—"

"Yeh." Del Given's face lost some of its wild, daredevil cast. "Ever'thing Norma an' me—an' you—have dreamed about." He brightened, then. Slapped Van on the back. Said: "Hush, now. I've seen to a few things—" he jerked his head toward the stock pens— "back around there. If I have to do suttin li'l things for myse'f—why, I reckon I can do them. I—wonder what that tightwad's doin' over here? He should be over bowin' before the pop-eyed populace now."

They eyed Skin Tendrow as he rode up to them. Tendrow's flat, nearly featureless face twitched nervously. The inevitable cigar, chewed and wet, waggled in one corner of his mouth. He slanted thin lips and talked around the stogie whenever he spoke. Now, he leaned his beefy yet strong big body in the saddle and looked at them.

"You want to be sure your rigging's in A-1 shape," he warned. "Good rides and events today are going to get bigger crowds tomorrow."

He rode on to pass the same word to others up and down the line. Del shook his head, feigning sadness. "Be too bad if he didn't make fifteen-twenty thousan' pesos promotin' this hoolihannin' hooraw," he observed. "As if we ain't *been* watchin'."

"Just the same, we can't watch too close," Van gloomily advised. He placed one hand on his stomach. "Me—I feel empty-like in here."

LOST to the racket all around him, Rainy Riordan put elbow on knee and rested his square chin on the heel of his hand. His interest in certain things was abnormal if viewed from the standpoint of the average spectator here. That was it: he wasn't the average.

His dark eyes had squintingly watched the—from here—pantomime at the chutes. He watched closely, noting things no other man ordinarily would. He saw Del Givens come from behind the chutes; saw the group break up, and watched while the rodeo promoter, Skin Tendrow, passed his word along.

His attention then shifted to the trap-jawed Sugrue, who looked not unlike a Mexican with his sombrero thonged tight under his chin as it was. Sugrue was pushing here and there among the crowd on the track before the stands. Looking for someone, evidently. He found that someone in the person of a girl who stood aside from the rest, eyes bright as she

surveyed the festive scene. Rainy Riordan's interest increased, yet now it was an interest tinged with regret.

"I'd *hoped* they wasn't messed in it," he mumbled to himself. He sighed. Bad enough that young Van Farney should mix with that outlaw there. That his sister, Norma, should also be involved was going to make it hard. He sighed once more as he continued to watch the pantomime enacted out there on the track.

Sugrue was close to the girl, scowling down at her. A trim figure in half riding boots, trousers, man's shirt, she tilted back her head and her red lips parted angrily. Sugrue was talking, waving his hands about. He seemed to be urging—or was he threatening? Whatever, Norma Farney would have none of it. She turned away, and when Sugrue grabbed her arm, she raised the quirt looped about her left wrist. He released her, stepped quickly back, and a pointing index finger was shaken warningly gun-like at her.

Rainy Riordan frowned. "I wonder what that means?" he asked himself, his eyes moody as he watched Sugrue stalk back across the infield. A few moments later, Norma Farney also went that way, going to the chutes where she joined Van and Del.

"Nohow, they can't do no damage now," Rainy decided. He gave himself up to enjoying the rodeo. He grinned at the antics of a clown and shuffled his feet—trim in riding boots worn beneath the trousers of his plain gray suit—impatiently when a steer-riding contestant made a pitiful show.

And as he grinned and shuffled his feet, Fate grinned down the back of his neck, and shuffled a hand of sanded hell that Rainy would have to play.

Cries of spectators and vendors bumbled lower. Ceased. The megaphoned bawl of an announcer echoed against packed tiers. "First of the buckin' ee-vents," he announced. "A bad hoss—"

"An' a bad man!" some heckler's voice rose loud in the silence. He was right. A bad man.

"—bad hoss, Feet Up, with Sugrue on deck. Comin' outta chute number one."

Across the infield, a gate banged open. A wild scream of intense rage, a burst of madness and hell in horseflesh form leaped into the arena. Ears laid back, eyes rolling viciously, Feet Up pitched as no horse, no matter how bad, ever should. He screamed equine evilness as he left the ground; bawled and grunted deliriously when he came down, legs stiffened, head twisted up and around.

Pick-up men and judges scattered. "Migawd!" someone close to Rainy cried. "Thet hawse is tryin' to bite thet man! Tryin' to *kill* him!"

Men were bellowing oaths; women were screaming. Nails and teeth brought blood into palms of hands and from drawn lips. Eyes that were terribly wide tried to wrench from the terrible scene, and could not. Rainy was conscious of a shrill, wailing scream from some woman's throat. It mounted, crescendoed sireningly until it broke hoarsely into nothing. And then he was leaping along the aisle and running toward the track.

The infield was a bedlam. Ropes swung, missed the hell-haunted horse. And that horse reared. Came down again and again upon the crushed, limp, lifeless bundle that had been Sugrue. Sugrue, who'd been tossed high at the third pitch. Who'd been unable to arise, and lay helpless—now dead—beneath those crashing hooves.

Feet Up, above that ghastly human wreckage, suddenly wheeled. Teeth gleaming, charged insanely at the

nearest mounted pick-up man. Rainy Riordan, a tall figure that sped grimly afoot across the field, suddenly stopped. His right hand vanished under the left lapel of his gray coat. Reappeared, then swung down. His elbow came back against recoil of the short-barreled .45 he'd conjured from under his coat. Beat backward again and again as his thumb worked in a winking arc above the blurred hammer of the gun.

Pick-up man and mount went rolling with Feet Up in the pile. When the dust cleared, the man and his horse were scrambling up. Feet Up did not arise . . . .

An hour later, a veterinarian stood back from the stiffening carcass of the dead outlaw horse. "He was a bad bronc in the first place," he said. "But not that bad. Riordan, this horse was doped to the eyes with something that made him wild.—Can't tell about what it was until a test of blood and saliva is made."

"Doped so he'd kill his rider?" Skin Tendrow croaked. "But who would do a thing like that? Like—God! It was awful. I helped pick him up. But who—"

Rainy's face was bleak; merciless. His voice was flat and the very brittleness of it was tantamount to sentence of death. "I'll be findin' out," he avowed. Tendrow recoiled.

"But—but what—I thought *you* wasn't with the Rangers no more. You—" Rainy didn't hear. "Doped," he snarled. *"Doped!"*

CHAPTER II

THUNDERHEADS

GRIMLY silent, his shifting glance disconcerting, Rainy Riordan looked from one to another of the group gathered in Tendrow's box-office beneath the grandstand. Norma Farney returned his gem-hard scrutiny curiously. Van Farney, her brother, looked more harassed than ever, while Del Givens ignored Rainy and had eyes for none but the two defiant men—Tunsall and Ankers.

Tendrow felt the silence needed breaking. "I heard Rainy wasn't on the Rangers no more," he offered. "But he—"

"Mebbe not," Rainy grunted. He disfavored Tendrow with the dark, cold look that had gotten him his name. They said that when Rainy Riordan looked like that, it was clouding up trouble to rain hellfire upon somebody before so very long!

"Mebbe, we'll say, I'm just int'rested for the state," he put it.

Ankers sneered. "Rainy, that kind of stable salad ain't my dish," he jeered. "You're still hooked up with the Rangers. We know it. We know why me and Tunsall and Sugrue—" Ankers scowled—"got so much time knocked off our stretches in Huntsville: You all think the dinero from—"

Rainy interrupted. Annoyingly calm, he said: "Six years ago, six men held up the Garaville State Bank. Busted it when they got off with thirty thousand dollars. But we couldn't find it when we caught you an' them others, Ankers. Yet you had no time to spend it."

"We didn't hold up that bank—"

"Ankers, I'm tellin' this yarn."

"Yeah?" Ankers sullenly subsided.

Rainy nodded. "One of your gang—we don't know who—got plumb away. The rest of you done time." He leaned forward and thrust his own face close to the snarling Ankers. "If you figger to be smart, fine. I *am* tail-

in' after you, Ankers. An' I'll stick with you if it takes the rest of my life. If the state of Texas don't get that loot, you'll never get it either!"

"Things happen," Tunsall hotly reminded.

"Shut up!" Ankers snapped at him. To Rainy: "We got no loot, and you can foller us and be damned!"

"Not now," Rainy shook his head. "You ain't goin' nowhere. Not a one of you in this place. That old score can stay dead—until I hook it in with the killin' of Sugrue."

He wheeled on Del Givens, and brought Del up with a jerk when he snapped: "Givens, you was *behind* the horse pens after the draw for mounts was made today.—An' before you moo, I'm tellin' you I positively know you've bet on yourself. You've bet everything you could beg, borrow an' scrape, an' you've been lookin' at a ranch up in the Panhandle!"

Del blinked, turned his head toward Norma. The girl blushed. Rainy nodded imperceptibly to himself. He waited. Tunsall and Ankers were strained toward Del. It was Ankers who yelled, "So *you* done it! That was what you meant when you said you wouldn't need any help today. You're helping Van Farney while you help yourself!"

"None of that!" Rainy curtly commanded. Del and Ankers dropped back in their chairs.

"He's bet he'd win the bucking contest, eh?" Ankers raved. "And he threatened he wouldn't need help today. Rainy, there's your—"

Rainy drew his gun and tapped the barrel suggestively on one knee. The fingers of the left hand ran up and down the black piping that was trimming around cuffs and collar and up the front seam of his soft linen shirt. They were his one vanity, those black-trimmed, expensive shirts. An odd vanity that bespoke a certain personal pride in himself and his name.

"Any more butt-ins — this comes down!" Rainy grumbled, again tapping the gun on his knee. He turned again to Givens. "You can explain why you was behind the pens before that d o p e d, killin' horse come out, Givens?"

Givens, it seemed, was on the point of telling Rainy to go to hell. Rainy foresaw such an invitation and his thin lips compressed as he shook his head slowly from side to side. Givens jerked his head suddenly. "Yeah, I can tell y', Ranger. I did bet all I could get I'd win the buckin' contests. An' I did an' do know that Sugrue an' Ankers was between me. I know, too, they ain't long out of the pen an' their names wasn't hurt by bein' there—names *they* had couldn't be."

Ankers shifted. Rainy raised the gun. Ankers sank back again. "An' I'm taken no chances," Givens continued. "I want that ranch for me an' Norma—" defiantly— "to live on when we're married. So I had a friend of mine come with me back there, then left him to guard the horse I was due to ride. You can ask him."

"I will," Rainy quietly assured him. He laid his gun on his lap and while he turned his attention to rolling a cigarette, he almost idly inquired: "Miss Farney, you had words with Sugrue in front of the grandstand. What about?"

THE girl started. She eyed Rainy almost fearfully. "He—he wanted me to talk to Van about something. Threatened Van," she said. Rainy nodded and let smoke dribble past his lips. "He was—with Tunstall an' Sugrue—havin' mad palaver with you before he come across an' nailed your

sister," he observed, turning his head to face Van.

Van Farney looked at Ankers. The cruel-faced outlaw's expression was jeering and triumphant. He, by his looks, fairly dared Van Farney. Dared him to do or say what? Rainy wondered.

"Aw, it was about the rodeo. They wanted me to draw out of the steer ropin', an' I wouldn't," he grumbled.

"I won't have it," Skin Tendrow yapped. "I won't have conniving among you contestants!"

"So, you won't have it. Now please shut up," Rainy commanded.

He leaned back, tilting his chair. Looking at his gun as though it were a new thing to him, he said: "Farney, your uncle, Charley Farney, was one of the six that held up that Garaville bank. He died in Huntsville, an' you was called to him while he was dyin'. What did he tell you?"

"Because my uncle was an outlaw —an' that was the only time he ever slipped, because he needed money— doesn't go to say I'm the same," Van heatedly protested. His face assumed a set, stubborn expression.

"Your uncle told you somethin'," Rainy remarked almost pleasantly. "You took the few trinkets they held for him in the office, an' you buried him. Not long after, you started ridin' the rodeo circuits."

Rainy banged the front legs of his chair to the floor. "Farney," he suddenly snapped, "you weren't huntin' for the one man of the gang that got away? Lookin' for him while you traveled to the rodeos?"

"He knows where he is, dam' him!" Tunsall squawked.

Ankers' backhand blow spilled Tunsall to the floor. He dared the gun in Rainy's hand to cry, "There wasn't anybody. We didn't do it."

Tunsall arose, wiping blood from his cut lips. "Right. I—I was tryin' to mix you up, Ranger."

"That other man couldn't, then, have recovered the money," Rainy grinned hoorawingly. "If he had, you'd not be wonderin' so, or gettin' together here. You want him, an' you want to know what Van's uncle told him while he was dyin' in Huntsville."

"Find out," Ankers hooted.

"Why, Ankers, that's just what I aim to do," Rainy agreeably assured him. "But first I got to find out why Sugrue was killed, an' who done it. Van, now, could've doped that horse. Gettin' revenge on you for hookin' his uncle into that Garaville job. Or he could've doped the horse to killin' point as means of gettin' another one of you out of the way. Spendin' that money wouldn't be easy with you rollin' your tails to kill him when he got it."

"It was that, or this Givens done it to make his bets safe," Ankers declared. "What arguments we got with Farney ain't your business. We're where you can't touch us, and—"

"But I can get in a position where I can touch you—with this," Rainy softly, meaningly reminded, patting his gun. "Why, Ankers, *you* could have doped that horse yourself."

"You mean you ain't turnin' these —these—" he waved at Del and Van— "over to the sheriff? What the hell kind of an officer are you, anyhow?"

RAINY looked down at the black-trimmed front of his spotless shirt. "Why, I'm the kind who keeps his nose clean, an' keeps clean in other ways, too. I'm like a burr, one with lots of stickers: I figure to stick to more things than one." His voice became harsh. "I ain't goin' to be sidetracked, Ankers. That goes for all!"

He looked again from one to another in that disconcerting way of his. He motioned with the barrel of his gun. "Out. All of you," he brusquely commanded. He grinned bleakly at Ankers. "So you agreed it was revenge or killin' to get you out of the way so he could get the money an' spend it—Van, I mean. You did, awhile ago."

"Nobody could get—The hell with you!" Ankers shouted.

He banged open the office door and plunged out. The rest followed. And then the door was opened again and Ankers, with Tunstall at his heels, stood there. Van and Norma and Del stopped cautiously and curiously nearby, perhaps fearing some tale or accusation while they were not present.

"Maybe you wouldn't be so damn smart as to keep me from having something that belonged to Sugrue," Ankers growled. "Well, I want his hat. He thought a heap of that hat, and I want it."

"You could have it, but I haven't got it," Rainy told him.

"It wasn't on the field. I looked!"

"It isn't here, an' I haven't got it!" Rainy irritably iterated.

Ankers wheeled. He crouched, dropping his hands toward guns he forgot he did not wear. Was reminded when he slapped his weaponless legs. "Dam' you, Farney," he spat. "So that's the way it lays!"

Van Farney shook his head. "I don't know—" he began.

"You'll find out!" Ankers threatened. He looked back at Rainy, and with Tunstall at his side, stalked rapidly away.

Skin Tendrow was waving his hands. "Why didn't you do something?"

"Rope," Rainy Riordan coldly explained. "I'm givin' 'em rope."

CHAPTER III

BOUNTY HOUNDER

RIORDAN flipped a match with his thumbnail and looked at the cowboy over cupped hands. "You—" he exhaled and flipped the burnt match to the ground— "hung around an' watched the horse Del Givens was goin' to ride yesterday afternoon."

"Sure did," the other replied affably. "I sorta snuck around about it, though. It wouldn't look so good to other contestants, yuh know, actin' suspicious like that."

"You went around there with him?"

"Why—why, no, I didn't. Del told me to meet him there, an' he was waitin' when I got there. Why?"

"Nothin'. Nothin' at all. Thanks."

Rainy turned away, walked over and sat in the morning sun, and watched the puncher walk toward another group who were practicing roping tricks in the infield. "Nothin'," he said to himself, "except that Del Givens *could* have doped that horse before you got there to be a sort of alibi for him."

He sat and smoked, and damned the authority that had taken him off his regular run to put him on tail of outlaws and bank loot. "A piebald cross between a deputy sheriff, a Ranger an' a detective!" Rainy grunted sourly. He fell to wondering why he was so certain this killing of Sugrue, one of the outlaws, hooked in with the bank money that never had been recovered. If he were wrong, then it looked bad for Del Givens. Looked bad anyhow. As Ankers said, it was not impossible Del had doped Feet Up to help himself and Van, all at the same lick.

He roused when the heavy voice of

Skin Tendrow croaked up behind him: "Rainy, I got something in mind, and I figured you'd be interested.—I never lost my interest in the law, you see."

Rainy sighed. "No?" his expression was enigmatical. "Way I get it, you never was int'rested in the law, but in the rewards you got for bein' a bounty-huntin'—"

"That's not kind," Tendrow protested. "Of course I'm interested in money. Was then. Am now. That's why I'm promoting rodeos. And—well, I *am* interested in the reward that bank and the state association offered six years ago. Does it still stand?"

"It stands," Rainy growled, making no effort to conceal his disgust. "You figger on collectin' some reward, huh?"

"No use being that way," Tendrow admonished. "I did lots of things I never got paid for, and took chances doing them, too. I brought in plenty men, with no reward."

"Yeah. Like the time about six years back when you toted in that dead man you found, and then raised hell because you couldn't figure who he was, or find a reward poster that fitted him," Rainy dryly reminded. "They took your deputy's badge for gripin' so much about it, seems I recollect. I was workin' on the Garaville case at the time. I remember."

Tendrow flushed and made an impatient gesture. "They ever find out who he was?" he asked, trying to conceal some anxiousness.

"Not that I know of." Rainy laughed cuttingly. "My gawsh, are you still gripin' an' hopin' to get the reward from a dead man you found in the hills years ago? An' you say you—aw, hell!"

"Wait." Tendrow grabbed Rainy's arm when the latter started to walk off. "You sidetracked me, Rainy. I come to tell you about Ankers and them others. When I come to the grounds awhile ago, they were all standing on the corner by the fence, arguing with each other to beat all hell."

"What about?" Rainy showed scant interest.

"Ankers was accusing Van Farney of swiping Sugrue's hat."

"That dam'—hat," Rainy muttered thoughtfully. "Ankers is just tryin' to use it as excuse to raise open trouble."

"I wouldn't know," Tendrow replied. "But I know I won't have them messing up my show. I've told them to be in the office under the stands at eleven this morning." He hauled out his watch. "It's near that now."

"Well?"

"Well, I figured if you'd slip into one of the ticket offices that open off the main room, you might get a line on things. They might do something—you know—or say something if they didn't think you were there."

"They're doin' too much now!" Rainy swore. "An' you're doin' this for half of the reward. Big-hearted Skin Tendrow! Come on."

He strode off toward the office under the grandstand. Tendrow, evidently angered, glared at the Ranger. "You and your fancy shirts!" he acridly exclaimed to himself.

TENDROW beat one fist into palm of the other hand by way of driving home his point. "I pay day money, and I pay some of you a little guarantee, win or lose, to get you to ride here. I ain't going to have your quarrel over hidden money that you stole bust up this rodeo."

"A dam' little guarantee," Tunsall sneered.

"And your remarks about stolen

money—stop them!" Ankers warned. He shifted until he faced Del Givens. His attitude was menacing. "I'm warning you that I'm going to ride rings around you, horse doper. Bust you like that. Six years in Huntsville didn't make me forget how to ride."

"I ought to kill you for that," Del quietly commented. He started toward Ankers. Norma, her voice quavery, grabbed his arm.

"Del—don't," she begged. He allowed her to stay him.

Ankers sneered. "Bluff! Just like the bluff Farney's trying to pull. Well—" he shook warning finger at Van Farney— "I'm calling your bluff. Because you got Sugrue's hat don't mean you got everything. Some time pretty quick, you're going to come through. That goes for Chignan, too—the hiding coyote!"

"I don't know where he is. Never met him. An' y' can put that under y'r saddle-blanket an' ride 'er plumb to hell!" Van ground out.

"Have it out somewhere else," Tendrow ordered. He looked at Tunsall. The thin-faced, nervous man was ready to back Ankers' play to the limit. He held his left arm away from his side and his right hand fumbled with the buttons of his shirt.

Squinting through a crack from the ticket booth, Rainy Riordan watched Van Farney. Farney's eyes fixed on Tunsall's hand, as did Tendrow's and Del Givens'. That hand was ready to slip beneath his shirt and grab his hide-out gun. The little finger stuck out, then jerked. There was a ring on it. A bit of Mexican silver-work. Ankers scowled and Tunsall dropped his hands to his sides.

"All right, we'll have it out somewhere else," Ankers agreed. He hooked his fingers into his belt. It was of braided horsehair, and prison made. The buckle was of hammered silver.

"That ain't all," Tendrow warned. "I mean—if you don't do right, you get no bonus for appearance. You need money, I know. The way to get it is to earn it. You get that?"

"There's other ways," Tunsall grouched.

A hooking sort of grin curved Tendrow's lips about the nasty chewed stump of his habitual cigar. "Not around me there ain't," he tersely advised. He made a shoving motion with both hands.

"Get out, and stay away from each other. Argue about hats and money and things when the rodeo closes tomorrow afternoon."

"If you wasn't such a skinflint dam' fool, I'd kick in your ribs for horning in what's nothing to you," Ankers sniffed. "But you ain't nothing to worry about. Stay that way!"

When the door had closed after them and Rainy had come in from the ticket box, Tendrow dropped into a chair, slapped a fresh cigar into the permanent opening at one side of his mouth and eyed the Ranger carefully. "What you make of it?" he queried.

Rainy flicked an imaginary spot off his immaculate shirt front, shifted his big hat to the back of his head and thoughtfully reefed a wheat straw paper from a little book. "I don't know," he said, very softly. "Swear, Tendrow, I don't know. Pers'nally, I think *you* are a plain dam' fool for actin' like you did."

"I got a right to protect my own interests," Tendrow protested with no little warmth.

Rainy pulled his Durham sack closed with his teeth. "Hmmmn. But *are* you, Tendrow? I wonder.—You're givin' them somethin' else to fight over, ain't you? They'll raise hell now,

tryin' to beat each other out of bonus money."

"They won't," Tendrow obstinately disagreed. "Tunsall and Ankers need money too bad. Out of Huntsville four weeks, they ain't going to be over-burdened with cash.

"Besides—" he removed the cigar from his mouth but still spoke, by habit, from the opposite corner of it—"I'm putting men out there to guard the starting chutes and the pens."

He jammed the stogie back into his face and looked triumphantly at Rainy.

"Why," Rainy solemnly approved, "I reckon that's a fine idea. Lightnin' never strikes twice in the same place, they say. But you can't tell. An' mebbe *you* can collect that reward, Skin.—Though pers'nally I think you'll get your throat cut if you don't keep out of this."

"Yah!" Tendrow hooted. "You're letting things pass under your nose, and are afraid I'll uncover something."

"Mebbe," Rainy placidly agreed. "But as they passes under, I smell of them things. An' if *you* mess it up for me—" his voice went warning and metallic—"I'll cut your throat myself—so help me!"

"Huh!" Tendrow sneered.

"Yeah—huh! I'm not passin' murder by, Tendrow. Neither am I lettin' it steer me off thirty thousand dollars that's buried, likely, somewhere in the hills.—So watch yourself."

"I will," Tendrow grunted. "I dam' sure will."

CHAPTER IV

HOLD-UP!

REGARDLESS of the welfare of anyone, Skin Tendrow aimed to give a show on this second day that would pull hundreds more in on the third and last day. The Salrios country, too, responded to the lure that death again might strike gruesomely, swiftly, horribly while they sat in the stands and looked on.

Whispers had gone around as the rustling of leaves on a cottonwood tree. Rumors that had it a feud had broken out among the contestants; that a gang from another rodeo circuit was out to wreck the Salrios annual affair—all sorts of impossible things and possible happenings to come, muted the holiday voice of the crowd.

On the field, handlers, contestants, officials eyed each other and were wary. Men with guns at their hips perched atop the pens and starting chutes. Through it all ran an electric, nervous tension that caused men to curse below breath and women to gasp.

Two rides apiece today. Bronc riders must sit a bad one to open the show, and finish off the afternoon's affair by topping off another one. To hell with the riders! Skin Tendrow was packing them in and the dollars clinked into the till.

Strained, white-faced, Del Givens lowered himself into the saddle, grasped the hackamore rope in a loop about his right hand and clutched his hat with his left. The voice of the announcer was far-off, meaningless to Del. He looked over the side of the chute, smiled wanly at Norma and Van and settled firmly in the saddle.

One stirrup lost, one bit of daylight between himself and the saddle, a grab at the saddle horn, hooking a spur under a cinch or failing to scratch the horse contest rules—and Del Givens stood to lose everything: the money he'd bet; the ranch in the Panhandle. Norma, even. Couldn't ask a girl to marry you when all you had

was day money at a few rodeos and a couple of fancy saddles.

No shouting, wild-west heroics here. Del said quietly, "Let 'im out . . . ."

. . . . The gun, the pick-up men, and Del came bowlegging back to the chutes with his saddle over his arm. He passed by Tunsall, who sneered. Del dropped the saddle, lashed out with both fists. Tunsall, bellowing profanity, knelt in the dirt, then lunged up. Other riders came rushing up. The tall figure of Rainy Riordan put in appearance.

"Yuh stay outta my way!" Del snarled, vainly attempting to break away from restraining hands. "Keep yuh dirty coyote looks to yuhse'f, *outlaw*, or I'll knock 'em off yuh hatchet face."

"That'll do, Tunsall." There was that in Rainy's voice that *had* to be obeyed. Tunsall checked some wild outburst, picked up his hat, beat it against his leg to rid it of dust and walked off. He looked back over his shoulder.

"After *that* rockin' hoss ride, kiss your dough g'-bye!" he jeered.

"What's the trouble?" Rainy walked on beside Givens.

"Because I got a bad horse that wouldn't buck right to give me chance to make a fancy ride, that chisel-faced dogie tries makin' new faces at me," Givens snapped.

"Poor little kid," Rainy hoorawed, his voice cutting. "Bad mans make naughty faces — Cut it, Givens. They're tryin' to get your goat. One bad ride because you drew a poor horse don't put you out of things."

"Better—not!" Givens ground out savagely and with such vehemence Rainy was startled. He stopped and let Givens walk on alone toward Van Farney and Norma. Rainy's long fingers ran sliding up and down the black piping of his shirt-front as he looked after Del Givens with calculative, smouldering eyes.

Rainy turned his attention to the field as wave upon wave of sound beat down from the stands. He watched, a slight frown and shake of his head indicating his displeasure, and saw Ankers getting in a ride in a hundred. Ankers had drawn a horse that was a natural rodeo performer. He bucked high and came down lightly; he swapped ends with the agility of an adagio dancer, yet put no spine-twisting strain upon the man topping him. Ankers was riding in great style and piling up points.

As the gun sounded and the pick-up men raced to take Ankers off—almost needlessly as the horse had slowed at the sound of the gun—Rainy swore softly. This was going to further complications that already were too involved.

"I could pinch Givens or Van Farney—even the girl, an' have plenty suspicion to go on," he growled to himself. "But the hell of it is, I could also jug Tunsall an' Ankers the same. It wouldn't ferret out no thirty thousand dollars, an' it wouldn't give reason why Sugrue was kilt—nor tell me who.

"I got to keep givin' 'em rope." He held up both hands and looked whimsically at the palms, half as though he fully expected to see rope burns on them already from paying out line so fast.

He sat on a saddle rack, then, and watched Van Farney take second in the steer roping. He saw Ankers strut toward the hospital tent, chest up and hat cuffed cockily to one side of his head, holding out a hand that had the hide knocked off a little place. A bandaged hand would look good to the

audience when Ankers made his second ride today, Rainy sarcastically reflected. He looked around for Tunsall, and could not spot him.

A ONE-EYED man, puffing and blowing and stuttering because he was overflowing with excitement, rushed across the infield and almost knocked Rainy off the saddle rack.

"Ruh-ruh-Ranger!" he panted. "Cuh-cuh-come on. Th-there's a huh-hold-up goin' on!"

He spun and high-tailed back across the field. Rainy, taking after him, did no wondering. No use to wonder at anything else that happened here. When he got where the hold-up was, he'd see what he saw. He let it go at that.

The one-eyed man scooted out a side gate in the fence and blared for the front entrance of the grandstand. A few late-comers were breaking line at the ticket windows, and one of the ticket takers stuck his head through the window and started yelling "Robbery!" at the top of his lungs.

Rainy shoved his hand under his coat and drew his gun as he ran. From the boxed-off room that was Tendrow's office, then, came the sudden roll of a gun. Rainy skidded to a quick stop. A stumbling figure appeared in the door of the office, grasped the side of the doorway and turned half around. Another shot—a flat beat that was immediately lost in the clamor of the crowd in the stands above them—snapped out. Rainy, as he stood crouched near the fence, gun up, was glad the crowd was making noise. They wouldn't know of this until the rodeo was over today—he hoped.

He saw the man in the door wobble, sag, fold in every joint and pitch halfway back into the office. Rainy ran forward again.

Tendrow, his cigar working a circle as he chewed it rapidly, knelt beside the dead man lying so grotesquely half in and half out of the office. He shifted his gun to his left hand and reached out to gingerly touch the limp thing he'd laid low. His back was to Rainy, and Tendrow was shaking his head almost sadly.

"The hell!" Rainy blurted, standing above the body as Tendrow arose.

"It—it is hell," Tendrow hesitantly admitted. He stood there chewing his raveled cigar while Rainy chased back the small crowd, bent, dragged the dead man into the office and shut the door.

"The hell!" he again exclaimed. The dead man was Tunsall!

Tendrow placed his chair where he would not see the blank-expressioned, graying face nor the staring eyes of Tunsall. He got a quart of whiskey from his desk, pulled the cork and drank deep.

"Whuffff!" he spluttered, handing the bottle to Rainy. The Ranger waved it aside. Said: "While we're waitin' on the sheriff, s'pose you tell me what happened?"

Tendrow speared his mouth with another of his cheap cigars. "I got to worrying about what you said this morning, Rainy. You know—when you told me to watch myself. Big crowd today." Tendrow looked momentarily pleased and pawed at the spilled silver and bills heaped on his desk. Continued:

"Big crowd. I remembered what you said, and also what Tunsall had said about being other ways to get money besides working for it. So I stayed in the office myself."

"Yeah, yeah," Rainy impatiently muttered. "But the one-eyed man that came lopin' after me?"

"That's Gandy. Works for me during the rodeo, feeding stock and such work. I can trust him. I arranged for him to stay outside the office and watch. If I was held up, I was to give a signal and he was to get you.—Well, I was held up, and I did. Gave signal."

"Why didn't you put me wise to what you had fixed?" Rainy fumbled at the front of his shirt.

"You'd growled at me," Tendrow sullenly answered. "You'd said I was hunting rewards. Anyhow, I didn't *know* I was going to be held up."

"Oh, no," Rainy jeered. "*You* wouldn't want a reward of cash money.—Well, get on with it." He motioned commandingly.

Tendrow shrugged wearily. "Tunsall come in, stuck his gun on me, backed me against the wall and starting scooping up the cash. I backed near the window, gave Gandy the signal, and before you got here, Tunsall started out. He couldn't find the doorknob reaching backward, so he turned his head. I yanked my cutter and popped him."

"Considerably, you popped him," Rainy dryly agreed. He picked up Tunsall's gun from the floor. It hadn't been fired. The buttons on the front of Tunsall's faded shirt had been torn off. They lay like vagrant bits of popcorn on the floor. Bills and silver littered the floor, too, and there were wads of bills stuck inside Tunsall's shirt.

"Dam' reward huntin' skinflint," Rainy griped without feeling. "You should've known better than to've told them no bonus money if they acted up. An', like a lot of your kind, you got all the *luck* in the world."

He shook his head slowly in exasperation. "I swear I don' know if to hit you or pin a medal on you."

"Neither!" Tendrow snapped. "And from now on, you can handle those robbing, killing devils, and keep Ankers off my neck."

"Yeah," Rainy nodded thoughtfully. "I'd thought about that, too." He looked down at Tunsall, swore softly, then let the sheriff in.

CHAPTER V

DEATH'S EDGE

THE sheriff walked uptown with Rainy. An easy-going, unimaginative man, he gave no second thought to the shooting that afternoon. "Open and shut case, Rainy," he said as they parted in front of the Casa Mañana, the so-called leading hotel of Salrios.

"Well," Rainy observed, "it's shut. I agree to that."

Dusk was softening the outlines of dry hills and stunted growth that hemmed Salrios in as Rainy went inside and took a seat in the lobby. Rannihans dolled up in circus clothes and imagining they were the spirit of the true west; real westerners who looked like Chicago or Kansas City folks, save for their squinting eyes and lean, tanned faces. Noise, a band playing in the street to advertise a dance that night. . . .

Rainy shut all this away from him as he sat low in a deep leather chair half facing the stairway. He was thinking of the aftermath of the holdup and killing that afternoon. He was trying to place the pound-pound of one persistent idea in an orderly spot in his mind.

It concerned Ankers, the cruel-faced outlaw who had, after riding his second horse to pile up more points over Del Givens, come too quietly to the office under the stands. Something of perplexity had softened what rancor Ankers might have felt. "Tun-

sall was a fool, after all, I reckon," he soberly said, looking down at the blanket-covered body that hadn't then been removed.

Ankers attempted unsuccessfully to hold his voice to disinterested tone. "Rainy, there's a ring on the little finger of Tunsall's right hand. He prized it. Wonder if I could have it."

Rainy jerked, peered wonderingly at Ankers, then turned to the sheriff, an unspoken question on his lips.

"Don't see why not—seeing's he was your pardner," the sheriff said.

Ankers knelt, lifted the blanket. Watching closely, Rainy saw Ankers' face become seamed and damningly hard. He dropped the blanket, stood erect and closed one eye when he looked at Rainy. "*You* been in here all the time? *You* saw him fall?" he ground out.

"Did see him. Was here," Rainy answered curtly.

"*You* didn't take a ring off him, eh?"

"I took nothin' off him, an' didn't let anybody else come in," Rainy grunted. "Is the ring gone? Mebbe he gave it to some one."

There was threat in the way Ankers glared at Rainy. Threat and no little of anger and fear. "So Tunsall might've sold out on me,—scared, after Sugrue got it," he mumbled harshly to himself, seeming to forget Rainy was present.

"Sold out? What the hell do you mean, he sold out?"

"Something else that's none of *your* look-in," Ankers yapped. He licked his thin lips, rubbed his hands on the sides of his pants and stared straight at Rainy again. "If he didn't," Ankers pushed the words through set teeth, "sell out, it's bad. And somebody had better not get *too* dam' wise!"

He turned on his heel and went quickly out. Puzzled? Rainy had never been half so puzzled in all his life. Why the rumpus over a ring? It had been the same with Sugrue's hat, he recalled. What bearing did these seemingly trivial articles have on the killing of Sugrue, Tunsall's attempted hold-up, or the squabble between Van Farney, his sister, Del Givens and the others?

Mulling it over, Rainy felt like a dog chasing its tail. He swore angrily and snatched up a Fort Worth newspaper and attempted to read. Couldn't, and started to lower the paper from before his grouchy-expressioned face. He stopped with only his eyes showing over the top of the sheet; eyes that squinted and became keen as he watched Norma Farney step from the stairway, look quickly around and then hurry through the lobby door.

"She's anxious, an' not much wantin' to be seen," Rainy mentally assured himself. He dropped the newspaper to the floor and went clicking across the lobby. A woman smiled come-hitherly at him, then sniffed as he went by never noticing her. Rainy had eyes for none save the girl ahead.

He felt like a fool as he trailed Norma through the crowd that already was beginning to pack the streets in warm-up preparations of the night's festivities. He cussed, too, because he was more at home in a situation where guns counted heavily and trailing was done on horseback and the tracks were readable on the ground.

"The Rangers is comin' to the point where I expect we'll be nursemaids to lost babies an' stray cats, keeps on," he complained. Yet he knew it was a compliment to him that he'd been put on a job like this. A job where brains and patience and savvy counted for such a lot. Brains? He assured himself.

he'd shown no brains nor ability—nothing so far.

NORMA FARNEY turned a corner off the main street and went swiftly down a dark way that was narrow and cobblestone-paved. Rainy moved up. He could hear the rapid clickity-click of her bootheels. They seemed to rap out an anxiousness and frantic determination that Rainy was quick to catch. And then she was gone.

A cracked globe burned dismal light against a faded sign hanging above a doorway. "Be damned," Rainy muttered, rubbing his finger tips along the black line of his shirtfront. He was undecided. That fumbling at his shirt was a sure sign. What was Norma doing in a cheap joint like the Vaquero Rooms? What—unless she had come to see Ankers!

Ankers had a room here. Rainy had ascertained this two days previous. Even knew the number of the room. He swung into the doorway and took the stairs soundlessly two at a time. There was no office. The place smelled of stale drinks and smoke and dirt. He tip-toed down the uncarpeted hallway to a door near a window at the far end. A single red bulb burned above the window. Looking out, Rainy saw an old painters' ladder thrust up in compliance with fire laws easily gotten around. He went soundlessly back. Put his ear to the door and listened.

He knew Norma Farney's voice; also Ankers'. And he heard them both now. Indistinct, save for a few words now and then. Angry words spoken in angrier tones. Once: "We won't give up . . . you got the ring . . . We did not get that hat!" That was Norma. She raised her voice: "Van promised Charley . . ."

Rainy heard Ankers curse. "Lies. Can't make me give up. I'll find Chignan . . . beat you yet . . ."

Rainy ducked back. Slipped out the window onto the ladder just in time. Head held high, face flaming, Norma slammed out of Anker's room. "Even if you won't do what we ask, we'll win anyway!" she shrilly warned as she flounced off down the hall.

Rainy slipped back through the window, walked to Ankers' door, and went in without knocking. Ankers wheeled, half reached for the six-gun that lay on the sagging iron bed, and thought better of it when Rainy made a motion toward his own gun.

"Sneaking around, huh?" Ankers snarled.

"Mebbe," Rainy calmly agreed. He shoved dirty clothes off a chair and sat down. Almost conversationally he inquired, "What did she mean, Ankers, when she said they'd win, even if you didn't do what they asked?"

"Is it your business?" Ankers coldly demanded.

"I could fix you up, Ankers," Rainy reminded the other. "I could get you for havin' that gun, or for a lot of things. You ain't half so free of Huntsville as you might think—if I want to put on pressure!"

He leaned toward Ankers, his attitude threatening. It didn't take long for this to soak in. Ankers was doing some tall thinking. Rainy almost could hear his mind clicking. He grinned coldly.

"It was about—about the rodeo," Ankers growled. "She and the rest are afraid Givens will lose. I beat him bad this afternoon. They wanted me to take the purse, but let Givens win so he'd collect his bets. And I wouldn't!"

"An' if that's a lie—I got to prove it. Yeah." Rainy was sarcastic. "Well, mebbe I can. Now—Ankers, who is Chignan? No? You never heard of him, eh? Swell. Then what's the racket

over Sugrue's hat an' Tunsall's ring?"

"Smart, ain't you. Dam' smart. You trying to play me? Well, jug me, wise hombre. Yah! You don't dare. You think I know where there's thirty thousand dollars hid, and you want me to lead you to it."

RAINY was off the chair, bent at the waist, his right fist slamming upward as he bent his back and rose on his toes, grunting with effort. Ankers spun half around and fell against the wall. He pawed at the wallpaper as he slid to the floor.

"That's for hombres that are *too wise!*" Rainy mocked without merriment. He was fully aware, as he went out, that the look on Ankers' face, the hot gleam in his sunken eyes was one of hate that would let him stop at nothing. Not even death.

As he swung his feet in angry jerks back toward the crowded main street, Rainy felt a vague, inexplicable uneasiness possessing him. Something was coming to a boil. He wanted that; but he wanted, too, to know what it was before it boiled over!

"If I don't get back of this soon," he grumbled to himself, "I'll—"

Two things came to him at the same time. One, the realization that he was passing the mouth of a dark, narrow little alley. The second . . . He hurled himself flat as a bullet plucked at his sleeve! An indicator of gun-flame pointed toward him, and a second bullet screeched off the bricks too close to his head. Rainy rolled over, came to his knees, got his own gun clear and squirted to his feet.

No more shots. Not a sound. And though he worked carefully down the darkened alley, he saw nobody, heard nobody. He ran around the block, crossed the street and looked up at Ankers' window. Ankers was bent above a washbowl, holding a cloth to his chin.

"He could've run right back," Rainy told himself grimly.

"An'—" he whistled softly under his breath—"Del Givens or Van Farney could've followed me when I followed Norma." He walked slowly up the street, his gun still in his hand. It came to him suddenly then, and left him mentally kicking himself.

"I wonder," he blurted, "if this Chignan's hangin' on the edge!"

CHAPTER VI

OUTLAW GAME

RAINY was aware that Ankers watched very attentively. It was breathlessly hot this afternoon, and what breeze stirred was but hot aggravation to bodies already sticky and dirty with perspiration and dust.

"C'mere." Rainy touched Van Farney on the shoulder and jerked a thumb toward a doubtful bit of shade near the chutes. "Nuh-uh," he warned, shaking his head at Del Givens. "You stay out here an' practice your gun-th'owin'; you can stand practice."

Del passed him a look that told Rainy Del thought him loco. Or did he? Mebbe-so Del Givens was one damned good actor.—If it *had* been Del who slung shots out of that alley last night.

Rainy squatted, built a smoke and then put an abrupt question to the wondering Farney: "Who's Chignan?"

Van jerked, eyed Rainy narrowly. His under lip came up and stubbornly pressed his upper lip against his teeth. He shook his head. "I never saw him, Rainy. Don't know," Van finally answered.

"So? Look here, Van—" with hard

directness— "you're in to somethin' that may be more than you know. Again, mebbe you do know; an' it's truth I don't know about that."

"What're y' gettin' at, Rainy?" Van sullenly refused to meet the Ranger's eyes.

"Just this," Rainy told him coldly. "Charley Farney was in on the Garaville robbery. He went to the pen. While in there, he never had a thing to do with them others he was sent up with. But when he died, he called his nephew, you, in. He told you somethin'. That somethin' has to do with that thirty thousand dollars an' a outlaw—one never caught — named Chignan.

"Which same, Farney, has led to a killin', an' a shot at me last night. So—"

"So—nothin'!" Van shot back. "They's lotsa men like to take shots at the law. I don't blame them! There was my uncle, Charley. He made one slip in his life, an' gets the same as the rest, who'd always been outlaws."

Van's face was bitter. So were his words. Heatedly, he ran on. "What did the law do for Charley. Yah! You know. He was sorry for what he done, an' would've made up for it. He still might make up for it! But he won't have help from no one-sided law takin' all the credit from his dead name!"

Van got off his haunches and stood there with his fists balled at his sides. He was breathing heavily. Rainy, oddly enough, said low, almost to himself, "So it's somethin' like that. An' I ain't been so very far wrong all along. If I could find this Chignan!"

He looked up at Van Farney, stood erect, fumbled at the front of his shirt. "'Sta bueno, kid," he mumbled. "Your feelin's are all wrong, far as the law part is concerned. But it's *your* neck that's in the loop."

With this to worry Van, Rainy turned and walked away. He was conscious that Ankers, lounging nearby, was still glaring balefully after him. And his back crawled and itched.

Rainy perched on the railing between infield and race track and watched a cowgirl race. He couldn't have told, afterward, what had been going on. He was shuffling parts of a puzzle around in his mind without too much success. Yet here and there a piece went dropping into place. Given time, the pattern might complete. Time was something he had, yet did not have. He needed the piece of the puzzle that had Chignan's name on it.

"Dam' Chignan!" he declared himself heartily. He looked far up the track. A wild series of yells, a thunder of hooves, the roar from the grandstand told him something else had started. He watched without interest while the racers rounded the upper turn.

Why, what caused it, Rainy never knew. But he sat up on the rail and took interest. It was a Roman race. Cowhands r u n n i n g horses two abreast. One foot on one horse, one on the back of the other, they stood and gave it hell as they came on. Something, some forewarning of dire, threatening disaster jerked Rainy's nerves.

The man in the lead was Van Farney. Rainy saw Van's knees bend more as he balanced and rushed his mounts to the rail in front of the wild-riding pack behind him. And right then, as he jumped off the rail and ran, Rainy knew that glum premonition had been right.

THE rail horse, under Van's left foot, reared and lunged toward the center of the track. The pair raced on. But Van Farney was not standing,

bobbing, swaying above them now. He was spilled to the track squarely in the path of those behind him.

And then, while men ran that way, while Van rolled from the impact of the last shod hoof and the stands rose to time of a deep, welling gasp of horror, the pounding horses went by.

Del Givens and Skin Tendrow were off their horses and over the rail. Tendrow got there first. He bent over Van, loosened his shirt, jerked the heavy leather cuffs from his wrists and knelt so the burning sun would not strike the bloody, dust-caked face.

The sobbing moan of an ambulance whimpered out. White-clad men dumped a stretcher onto the track and lifted Van onto it.

"Van!" Norma was crying above him. Del, hollow-voiced, tried to talk to her, hold her back.

"We'll follow him to the hospital, Norma."

Van opened his eyes. He grimaced, gasped, rolled his head over until he could see Del. "No," he painfully whispered. "Stay here, an' ride 'em, Del, ride 'em."

With Norma inside with her brother, the ambulance rolled away. Del Givens, head down, walked slowly, thoughtfully off the track.

The stands were quieting again. Disappointed, a lot of them were. This accident had been just that: an accident that could occur in any old rodeo. They'd hoped for something—well, different.

Rainy walked slowly back across the infield. Turned, and apparently did not see Tendrow. That, or looked through him.

"Thank cripes we had one accident that wasn't hatched!" Tendrow squawked.

Rainy blinked. "Oh. Oh, sure. But was it—an accident?"

He left Tendrow staring keenly after him. And then Tendrow ran to catch up with him. Pawed Rainy's arm. Rainy jerked away, inspecting his shirt sleeve. "Don't paw my shirts, Tendrow," he rasped angrily. "Anything makes me *mad,* it's havin' my white shirts soiled. What do you want?"

"We're having the stagecoach business next." Tendrow was ignoring, perhaps wisely, his bawling out over the shirt. "You know, where we run in the old stagecoach and have a bunch chase it around the track, shooting and yelling like outlaws."

"I wish *real* outlaws was as simple an' loud as that," Rainy commented wryly. "But they ain't. Never." He pulled away. "I got somethin' to look after now, anyhow."

"Won't take a second. Put it on now to quiet down the crowd before the bucking finals. You in that white shirt and all—you'll be a help to me, Rainy."

To get a horse between his knees for just a few minutes, to smell gunsmoke, even from blanks, would be a relief from the tension, and the disgust of being, as Rainy disgustedly said, a "white-collar nursemaid detective."

"I'll ride, then," he consented. "But I *ain't* ruinin' my gun with no blanks. Not me. I'll just wave the old cutter around an' let off steam."

Tendrow hesitated, shrugged, allowed that it was "'sta bueno" and went off.

THE old coach creaked, rattled and rocked twice around the infield and then swerved through a gate onto the track, the driver lashing out at the four horses and looking back of him. Perched beside the driver on the high seat, Ankers nursed two six-guns and put 'er on big for the audience. Heads

were thrust through the windows of the coach. One grinning, half-soused cowhand holding a bedraggled woman's hat on his head and banging away before the "outlaws" put in appearance.

And then they came riding from beside the grandstand. Guns racketed like a pan of titanic popcorn; shrill whoops and yells and grandstand riding as they chased the coach. Grinning sheepishly, Rainy waved his gun and rode with the mob. "At least," he thought, "I can *play* at bein' worth somethin'."

The "outlaws" gained on the swaying old coach as it rounded the track and swept down toward the grandstand again. Rainy was, he had to admit, enjoying himself horsing along with this yelling bunch of cowhands. Even Tendrow seemed to be enjoying himself and not thinking of money for the moment.

Before the grandstand, the guns beat a last blasting roar. The driver braked up and his hands went above his head. Ankers, it appeared, wanted to hog the whole show. He fired two guns, stood up, tossed his hands above his head and tumbled overside to the track. The crowd roared approval of this realistic touch.

But not Rainy. Something about the way Ankers had spun, stretched, dropped and hit was too damned real. Rainy had seen men die. He knew. He swung off his horse and cleaved the milling gang about the coach.

Ankers was on his haunches now, looking up at the laughing crowd with eyes that mirrored pain and hate and fear. He was pushing hard on the ground with his knuckles; trying to force himself to his feet. "Uh—uh—uh!" he panted and groaned. Sweat poured off his face.

Rainy let a hoarse oath burst past his lips. Those wide, awful eyes of Ankers'. And the dark stain that spread slowly over his shirtfront. . . .

"Help me get him off the track!" Rainy cried. "You fools, he's really shot!"

CHAPTER VII

"CHIGNAN'S DEAD!"

RAINY came out of the hospital tent, a figure so quietly, chilly grim the counterpart of him would be found only in the blued steel of a gunbarrel or hissing winds of arctic storms. A few yards away, remaining apart from everyone, Del Givens squatted on his haunches. He picked up dust and let it dribble from his fingers; made marks with his fingers in that dust, all the while slowly shaking his head from side to side.

He became conscious that someone was staring at him, looked up, and his face set stubbornly, defensively. He rose and came to Rainy. "I know what yuh're thinkin', Rainy," he accused flatly.

"I doubt it," Rainy grunted, hardly moving his lips. Then, off-handedly: "Guess it's you an' that Crazy Woman brawnk snapper for it, Givens. You should win the buckin' contest—*an'* your bets."

Doubt, surprise, perplexity was evinced by Givens. More of worry, however, than all else. Was he worried about Van Farney? Or—what? Someone from inside the tent called to Rainy, then, and at the same time the announcer bawled that Ankers, injured in falling to the track from the coach, would not be in the bucking finals, which would now start.

Inside the tent, a doctor was putting away a hypodermic syringe. He raised his eyebrows at Rainy and made a little gesture: Ankers was done for.

Rainy pulled up a stool and sat beside the cot on which Ankers lay. The dying man rolled his head. His pain-bright eyes gleamed malevolently at the Ranger. "Well," he grunted. "Satisfied?"

"Any idea who shot you?" Rainy ignored Ankers' question.

"I hope Givens breaks his neck, dam' him!" Ankers said by way of answer.

"You know your chances, don' you?" Rainy very gently inquired.

Ankers stared straight through Rainy; beyond him. He nodded. "Hell—yes! I been shot before. But I won't be—again."

"You didn't kill Sugrue, or put Tunsall up to that robbery?"

"Nope, Ranger, I didn't dope that horse, or put Tunsall up to any robbery.—And before you ask: I had nothing to do with that horse shying and dumping that——Van Farney!"

"You didn't shoot at me, last night?"

Ankers looked squarely at Rainy. "I hadn't heard of that," he avowed. Rainy nodded. He believed the man. He shifted on his stool. "Ankers, why don't you tell me where that thirty thousand dollars is cached? Or do you think this Chignan could have it?"

"Chignan, no *one* man could find it," Ankers insisted gloatingly. "And me—Ranger, you'll get no help from me. Maybe you'll never find that money. I hope not!"

ANKERS coughed. Rainy leaned, wiped red froth from Ankers' lips with a bit of gauze. He rolled a cigarette, looked at Ankers, then put the cigarette to Ankers' lips and held a match. The doctor started to protest, then changed his mind. After all, Ankers had little time. One cigarette—if he finished it!—would do no harm.

"You wouldn't say what part in this Van Farney is playin'?"

"All the parts, dam' him," Ankers croaked. "Ask him, Ranger. Choke it out of him what that white-livered, preaching uncle of his told him."

Rainy expelled a heavy, sighing breath. "Ankers, I'm askin' you one thing more. If you want to see the man that shot you get what's comin', you answer me."

"I won't see it—but I'll wait for him in hell, Ranger," Ankers whispered fiercely. "What's the question?"

"Do you know where Chignan is?"

For a brief space, Ankers was silent. His face worked and his fingers picked weakly at the blanket thrown over him. "I don't know," he finally muttered. "But Van Farney—dam' him again!—does."

"All right. What does Chignan look like?" Rainy pressed.

"I'll tell you that. It may be the way—never mind. We called him Bignose Chignan. Big, red nose, a narrow forehead, and no chin to speak of. A weak one, in ways, Ranger. Tall, and thin, like a comic picture of an undertaker. I—Ah! You know him, eh, Ranger? All right. Him, the girl, Norma, Van Farney and Givens—get them all."

Rainy, tugging, tugging at the front of his shirt, his teeth set tight together, breathing heavily, started to kick back his stool and arise. He reconsidered. Sat down again. "Bignose Chignan, Ankers—I do know him. But Chignan ain't in this. Man, he's been dead since two days after the Garaville robbery."

Ankers raised his head, then fell weakly back. "He was wounded, but we didn't think it was bad," he grunted. He frowned at Rainy. "When they

got him, did they take a sort of medallion off a string around his neck? It was a piece of Mex silver work, you see."

"Nothin', that I know of," Rainy shook his head. "Look, Ankers. Why are all of you so interested in bits of silver work? Sugrue's hat, with that horsehair band an' silver buckle on it; Tunsall's ring. Now, Chignan's medallion."

"Ask Van Farney," Ankers rumbled. He coughed, tried to sneer defiantly, closed his eyes. For several long, seemingly endless minutes, Rainy sat in silence beside the cot. The mob-moan of the crowd in the grandstand, the yell of cowboys as the bucking finals took place outside seemed part of another world and time.

"Ranger."

"Yes?" Rainy looked again at Ankers. Ankers was staring at Rainy with wide, set eyes. His mouth was opened. A sighing, rattling sound rolled in his throat.

"Life," Rainy mumbled. He gently pulled the blanket over the dead man's face. He stood looking down at the cot, then, and suddenly bethought himself of something. He pulled down the blanket, and when he put it back in place again, he had the horsehair belt and the Mex-silver buckle in his hand.

He went outside, spoke to the doctor, and then squatted before the tent until the doctor sent the sheriff on this way. Tendrow came up, started into the tent. "He's dead," Rainy spoke harshly.

Tendrow looked askance at Rainy. Mumbled "Dead" in flat tone of voice and commenced walking back and forth before the tent. The sheriff came. Rainy talked briefly to him. The officer nodded.

"Best not to move him until the crowd leaves," he agreed. "I'll watch."

"Nuh-uh. Leave a deputy to do that," Rainy advised. "Come with me."

They waited while dusk commenced softening the shadows to purple and the heat of the day was pushed back by the faint, cool evening breeze. While Del Givens fought a bad one to a standstill to take the bucking finals, the silver mounted saddle and the purse. And when the flow of the crowd outward had well begun, they cut across to intercept Del Givens who hurried toward a side exit.

"Rushin' off, Givens?" Rainy called.

Givens turned and waited for Rainy and the sheriff. His lips were compressed, his face, coated with dust he'd not taken time to wipe off, got hard.

"I'm in more than a rush," he spat. "I'm headin' for the hospital where Van an' Norma is."

"I got word at the field while you was ridin'," Rainy told him. "Van's got three busted ribs an' some bruises. Be hobblin' around in the mornin'—he had the luck of the wicked, that hombre."

"Whew!" Givens let go a blasting breath of relief. He grinned like a schoolboy on the eve of a holiday. "In that case, you'll have time to come with me,—ain't that what yuh're fixin' to say, Rainy?"

Rainy chuckled dryly. "Kee-rect," he drawled. "But not to the juzgado —just yet. You've got a couple chances stayin' out of jail, Givens. We'll try the first one now."

THE sheriff and Givens at his heels, Rainy cut across the darkening field and walked around the pens where the horses were held. He

found a rope coiled on a post, took it down and shook out a loop. Deftly, expertly, he roped a horse and led it from a pen.

"This is the caballo that got notions an' caused Farney to get dumped," Rainy unnecessarily commented. "Let's have a look."

He commenced looking the horse over from hocks to head, running his hands over the dusty coat. Frowning, hardly knowing what to look for. Givens and the sheriff did likewise. It was the sheriff who made the discovery.

"What the hell—what's this?" The horse jerked its head around as the sheriff's exploring fingers probed a spot on its neck. A tiny lump barely under the skin fell under the sheriff's hand. "Light a macth, Rainy. Givens, hold his head a second." The match flared, the sheriff squeezed quickly. A B.B. shot fell out of the horse's hide into his hand.

Smiling thinly, Rainy took the bit of shot. "Likely shot with a nigger-shooter," he reckoned in satisfied tone of voice. "It barely went under the hide. But—" grim of voice—"it was enough to make the horse shy an' dump any man with one foot on his back. An' but for all the luck in the world, Van Farney'd be a tromped-up corpse right now!"

He turned to Givens. "That lets you out, part way," he said. "*You* wouldn't want to dump Van Farney. I'm positive of that."

"How about Ankers? Somebody shot *him*, and *he's* dead," the sheriff reminded.

"I *know* who did it!" Rainy snapped. "An' before many more hours, I'm goin' to *prove* it." He grabbed Givens' arm. "You're goin' to the hospital, Givens. You're goin' to talk to Van Farney, an' tell him I'll be there pretty quick. Tell him I know where Chignan is, an' lots more, an' that he talks or—"

"I savvy. I'll try to make him see it the right way," Del soberly replied. "Yuh want to tie up the loose ends that lead to thirty thousand bucks. I know that, Rainy. An' I'll help."

"If you know who kilt Ankers," the sheriff began when Del Givens had gone off in the deepening dusk, "why don't you—"

"Like Givens said," Rainy interrupted: "They's a matter of money comes in. I got to do—well, things."

"Which one of them started this?" the sheriff complainingly wondered aloud.

"Huh! An hombre named Chignan started the killin's, sheriff."

"Chignan? Where is this Chignan, then?"

The sheriff, then, thought Rainy Riordan loco as all of hell. He rolled a smoke, and over the match the sheriff could see a mean, yet mocking twinkle in Rainy's eyes. He flipped the match away.

"Chignan," he softly said. "Why, sheriff, he's been dead six years!"

CHAPTER VIII

PIECES OF FIVE

VAN FARNEY winched when the nurse raised his bed so he sat in a half-reclining position. She smoothed his pillows and briskly left the room. Norma sat beside Del Givens on the opposite side of the bed. Rainy, on the side next the door, faced them.

"Congratulations, on the ranch in the Panhandle," Rainy said to the girl, smiling. She nodded, but did not speak. Rainy turned to Van Farney.

"I guess Givens has told you things, Farney. Do you want to be hooked up with killin's? Or had you rather stop this fool kid's notion right now?"

"Kid's notion?" Van mumbled uncertainly.

"Kid's notion," Rainy repeated, nodding. "The notion that *you* are goin' to recover that Garaville bank money an' turn it back to the owners. I mean, without help from the law."

He stayed answer with upheld hand. "Wait, Farney. It's like this: Your uncle figgered he got a bad deal. Mebbe so. But *I* didn't give it to him. He was sorry. He wanted the money returned, an' you was to do it—an' tell the law to hell an' no credit."

"That—that's about the way the saddle fits," Van agreed very thoughtfully. "But," he added, " I was about to talk to you, once. When Sugrue got killed, an' me an' Del was suspected, I got sort of afraid to talk. Yeah—" he smiled wanly—"an' stubborn."

"An' now?" Pointedly.

Van Farney drew a deep breath. He said: "When Uncle Charley called me, he told me that him, Bignose Chignan, Ankers, Tunsall an' Sugrue an' an old, one-eyed Mex called Tuerto did that bank job.

"Chignan was wounded. He was masked—they all was before the fight started when they left town—only Chignan kept his up well—an' nobody saw him. Hard pressed, they made it to the Davis Mountains."

Van Farney was silent for several moments. Seemed to be looking upon some wild scene of outlawry as seen through dead Charley Farney's repentant eyes. His voice, when he resumed, sounded far-off.

"They didn't trust each other. The old Mex, Tuerto, was the only one they'd all half-way trust. So they had him hide the money. They all waited while he went up a canyon an' hid it. An' when he come back, he handed each man a piece of the map he'd made that showed where the money was. Without all the other pieces, nobody could find that cache."

Rainy half rose from his chair. "Farney—the directions of that old Mex was—"

"Was cut on bits of fancy silver. You savvy, eh?"

"So that's why that hat-band buckle, that ring—go on, Van!"

"That's right. Sugrue had the hat-band buckle; Tunsall a ring; Ankers wore a belt buckle, Chignan had a medallion, an' my uncle had a wrist band of hammered Mex silver work."

Rainy pulled the horsehair belt and the fancy buckle from his coat pocket. "That's Ankers' piece, a'right!" Van cried. "See?"

He took the buckle, turned it over and pointed. Squinting, Rainy read letters cut deeply with knife point: "—to rock Sun at noon—"

"Here." Norman Farney slipped a silver wrist band over one slender hand and handed it to Rainy. "—on E of rock. 2—"

"It matches after the buckle," Rainy exclaimed, excited for one of the few times in his life.

"Whoever got Tunsall's ring an' Sugrue's hat has as big a part," Van sourly advised. "An' *we* ain't that whoever, Rainy."

"I know. If I figured you was, you'd be in the hoosegow for murder," Rainy impatiently explained. He looked at Norma. "You was tryin' to talk Ankers into givin' up his buckle that night at the hotel," he stated. "Mebbe tryin' to get him to give up the ring an' hat-band buckle?"

She colored. "You knew that?—Yes, I was."

"But Ankers didn't have them. The man—the killin' coyote!—that's got Chignan's medallion is the one who got them things!"

"Chignan's medallion!" Van Farney exclaimed.

"Chignan's dead. I just discovered, from Ankers, who a certain dead man was," Rainy intoned. "The skunk that found him said he was dead when he come across him. That must've been a lie. Chignan must've talked to him before he died, an' babbled things."

"Was he—this one who found Chignan—the one who—"

"Yeah, Givens." Tersely. "He was the one who shot Van's horse with a B.B."

"Somebody took a silver wrist band I wore," Van Farney said. "While I was unconscious on the track today. But it was a fake. Norma had the real one. The one I got from my uncle."

HARSHLY, as though accusing them, Rainy said: "Listen! See if you follow me on this." He fumbled at the front of his shirt, scowled at a speck of dirt, and began telling of things as they came into his mind: "Who was always around—Wait! This Mex. The picture ain't complete."

Van Farney bit his lips, forgot his ribs and bruises, and was reminded when he shrugged. "Ouch!" he involuntarily exclaimed. Then: "Well, I thought I'd leave that out. Tuerto, who cut the directions on them pieces—Rainy, when he'd passed them out, Ankers an' Tunsall dragged their guns an' shot him down in his tracks! That *did* end possibility of any *one* man knowing the loot's location."

"An' balled it up when they was all caught—but Chignan," Rainy commented. "Well, let's go on:

"One person was always on hand when things happened. He was the polecat who, six years ago, found a man nobody could identify. That man was Chignan. He got Chignan's story an' his medallion, an' brought in the dead body.—Chignan's *dead* body, you sabe."

The three looked at Rainy, foreheads creased with perplexity. Rainy grimaced. It might have been a grin. But wasn't. "He was the one doped Sugrue's horse, an' got that hat-band buckle," Rainy ran on. "He was the one who set the stage for a fake hold-up by havin' me hide in his office while he threatened all of you with loss of bonus money. An' Tunsall, likely sent for, was shot down an' his ring taken. I suspected somethin' funny when I saw the buttons torn off Tunsall's shirt, like he'd been caught flat-footed an' tried to draw his gun. An' Tendrow had a man already posted—He *knew* what was comin' off!"

"Tendrow! Skin Tendrow?" It came as a chorus.

"Yeah," Rainy slashed the words harshly out. "Tendrow! The devil that found Bignose Chignan—only we didn't know who the Chignan hombre was at the time!"

It was a struggle for Rainy, He wanted to shove his gun against Tendrow's paunch and let the trigger kick until not a shot remained to be fired. Yet he forced himself to grin pleasantly as he sat down by Tendrow in the lobby of the Casa Mañana.

"Farney's gettin' along fine," he said. "Kickin' some, though, because he said somebody stole a bracelet he had."

"Wasn't the ri—wasn't much, I guess!" Tendrow snapped. Rainy knew: Tendrow was disgruntled because the wristband he'd taken off Van Farney had not been the one with the inscription inside it.

Rainy shrugged and seemed indifferent. "Undertaker was talkin' to me awhile ago," he said. "Wanted to know what to do with the few things Ankers had on him. His spurs, watch, an' that horsehair belt an' the silver buckle."

He noticed how Tendrow fought to hide a show of eagerness. "Oh, he's got them?—the undertaker, I mean?"

"Uh-huh."

"Guess he'll have to keep them, then. Don't think Ankers had any folks."

Rainy pushed himself out of his chair. "I'll tell him, if I see him in the mornin'. Goin' to eat now. I'll see you later, Tendrow; see you later."

Rainy knew damned well that he would!

CHAPTER IX

DEAD MAN'S TALK

SALRIOS slept. A half-moon played hide-and-seek behind swiftly drifting clouds. On the main street, bunting and pennons flapped in the wind. The rodeo was over, and Salrios was as a city of the dead.

A moving shadow went swiftly across the street and moved along close to the buildings toward the middle of the block. It ducked into the doorway, that shadow, of the undertaking parlor, and resolved itself into a nervous man: Skin Tendrow.

Inside, crouched behind two coffins stacked one atop the other, Rainy Riordan stiffened to the sound of someone prying at the door. A sickly shaft of moonlight dumped itself through a back window, and wind, through a broken pane, fluttered a white sheet spread over the outlines of a human body on a table a yard away.

Rainy Riordan feared neither man nor beast. His was a nerve of steel. Yet the filled coffins behind which he crouched, the still, white-draped form on that table; the wan moon-glow and the eerie mourning of the wind—Damn! It was getting him!

Tendrow was fumbling around in the little office up in front. Drawers rasped open and papers rustled. He stumbled against a chair, cursed, and his own voice echoed hollowly back at him. The sound shook him. Tendrow gasped.

Rainy heard the man's heavy, frightened breathing; heard his hands scrape chillingly along the wall as he felt his way back toward this drab morgue in the rear. In the doorway, Tendrow stopped. It was Tendrow. Faint moonlight, ghostily reflected off the window, ascertained that for Rainy. He felt no surprise. He'd known it would be Tendrow; come to get Ankers' belt.

He was mumbling to himself as he crept affrightedly toward the table. He jerked back as the sheet flapped again, then reached forth a trembling hand once more. He jerked the sheet down.

"Ahhh!" he sobbed strickenly. It was hideous: The blank eyes, the cruel nose and mouth; the drab, death's pallor of the dead face more hideous in the awful lunar light.

Rainy could stand it no longer. He had proven now, beyond all doubt, that Tendrow was the man.

"The belt. You want the belt, eh?" Rainy snarled, starting to arise. He held himself crouched over. Tendrow leaped, spun around, stood frozen in his tracks. His eyes threatened to pop from his head as he stared at the corpse of Ankers.

He thought the corpse had spoken!

His head, then, jerked toward the coffins as Rainy stood straight up. To Tendrow, it seemed that dark figure was rising out of one of the coffins itself. He screamed, one long, ungodly burst that sent the short hair erect on Rainy's neck and brought cold sweat streaming down his face.

"Tendrow! Tendrow—stop it!" Rainy thundered.

"*You!*" Tendrow bawled. He leaped backward, turned and went racing for the door.

"Tendrow—stop!" Rainy called, jumping into the street.

"Yah—yah!" Tendrow gobbled idiotically. He stopped his wild running, came to one knee facing Rainy and turned loose the gun he had drawn.

Rainy felt the swift burn of a bullet along his left side. "You—fool," he tonelessly called. The .45 bucked in time to his words.

Tendrow screamed again. Fear, nerves, fright and sheer hate had crazed him. He was knocked sideways, his right arm dangling. Rainy ran toward him. Tendrow swept his left hand around in the dust and caught up his fallen gun.

A face gone flat, expressionless, eyes hard and chill as glistening glacier ice, Rainy aimed deliberately and fired once more. As his elbow bounced back from the gun's recoil he started forward again.

Yelling, spitting, cursing, Tendrow rolled over and over in the street, both broken arms flopping wildly. He gained his feet, screeched insanely and started to run.

Sickened, gagging, Rainy knelt, squinted, fired once more. Tendrow's left leg gave under him, he pitched through the air and skidded over on his back. He was kicking his unwounded leg and yelling wildly when the sheriff, an awakened town, came piling into the street . . . .

IT was long after sunup when Rainy finished his telephone call, rolled a smoke and then went walking stiffly out onto the street. He yawned, patted his pocket to be certain he still had five pieces of Mex-made silver ornaments in it, and yawned again. The directions on those five pieces, all together, had been telephoned to Marfa. In an hour, men would be on their way into the Davis Mountains to recover the Garaville loot.

Del Givens and Norma Farney, Van walking stiffly, carefully between them, rounded the nearest corner and came toward him. Del was grinning from ear-to-ear and Norma was blushing rosily.

"Heard," Del said, "how you cleared it up, got them pieces from Tendrow, an' got him in the hospital under guard."

"It was wondreful of you, telling them how hard Van worked to make up for Charley the mistake Charley had made," Norma approved.

"That ain't what you're so happy about," Rainy accused.

Del shuffled his feet and chuckled.

"Nope. Ain't," Van hoorawed. "They're waitin' 'til the courthouse opens so they can get a marrige license."

"Life," Rainy thought. "Death came, yet others married, and life went on. Just like a rodeo. The red rodeo just ended. When one was done with, there was always another."

"We're going to have breakfast before the wedding," Norma was saying. "Won't you come with us? Please."

"Huh? Oh, sure; sure."

The Laughing Senor

The Story of a Western Robin Hood Who Stole Only to Right a Wrong and a Renegade Who Used His Name to Perform Every Lawless Deed on the Books

By Claude Rister

CHAPTER I

HOLDUP!

"HOLY, jumpin' geehoosifer!" Lan Donaldson yanked his mount to a stop. A short while ago a cloud of dust and a swiftly moving black speck had told him that the stage was nearing Lobo Pass. And now down there in that long, brushy pass four men were skulking like wolves.

Lan jerked a pair of spyglasses from a saddle pocket and quickly adjusted them to his eyes. "Holdup, shore 'nough," he muttered.

Two of the men were mounted. Two others on foot were sneaking into hiding on either side of the trail. As he noted the silver braided and spangled *caballero* attire, and the black domino of one of the riders Lan blurted: "Uh uh, the Laughing *Senor!*" and his mouth twisted in a queer, knowing grin.

He threw his glance again up the trail. At that very instant the stage came whirling around a rocky hill-point and into the mouth of the long, slender pass. He could see leathery old Deadwood Joe Wallace, veteran guard; and Lanky, walrus mustached Poke Givins, up top. The fronts of their floppy hats were flattened back by the wind, and the two strands of Poke's long mustache were fluttering like ribbons.

Lan Donaldson felt a swift wave of pity for the two old-timers. Doubtless they had no inkling that a trap lay ahead. The odds would be two to one—plus surprise. The bandits might even cut loose without warning. Many black deeds stood charged against that mysterious bandit, the Laughing *Senor*.

"I'll take me a hand in this little game," mumbled Lan Donaldson. "I don't aim to let that crime happen if I can help it."

He shoved his spyglasses back into the saddlebag, and yanked his Marlin 32-20 carbine from under his left leg. As the rifle quit its boot the cowboy roweled his speckled blue bronc, and with knee pressure, wheeled the mustang into a sharply down-slanted ravine.

Gravel shooting from its flying hoofs, the horse went down the slanted draw and out onto the narrow valley. As Lan topped a slight ground-swell he saw that he was too late. The stage already was entering the trap.

Lan had gone to the wreckage. He would take the strongbox and later turn it over to the Fargo office in town—he thought. He was poking about the ruins in search of it, when a sharp voice stiffened him. "Don't move, fellow! I've got you covered!"

He saw two masked riders push suddenly into the open. "Halt! And put up your hands!" one of them yelled. Old Deadwood Joe's sawed-off shotgun jumped. Leathery Poke Givins sent a hand driving for a six-gun. Doubtless the two old-timers in electing to shoot it out, believed there were only two of the holdup men.

"Pore old fighters!" thought Lan. "They ain't got a chance!"

The guns of the two horsemen barked. In the brush two rifles cracked. The leathery faced stage driver crumpled. He dropped the lines, keeled sidewise, disappeared from Lan's view over a corner of the coach-body. Deadwood Joe had jerked up the muzzle of his blunt shotgun, and he got in one-hipshot before the robbers could cut him down. His blast of buckshot swept one of the riders from the saddle and flopping into the dust. Deadwood buckled at the middle and pitched over a corner of the dashboard.

The four-horse team was still in full gallop. Three human forms now were sprawled on the trail. The rider with the black domino and fancy Mexican attire wheeled to the side of the trail, and as the stage-team came tearing alongside he reached out and seized the bridle of a lead animal. Quickly he brought the outfit to a stop.

"Come on, men!" he yelled in Spanish. "Work fast, so we can get out of here!"

It all had happened in an instant, as cowboy Lan Donaldson was charging over the groundswell. Now he saw two masked men dart from the chaparral and enter the stage through opposite doors. He yanked up. It was too late to help Deadwood Joe and Poke Givins. The poor old-timers had ridden their last stage. Lan was nervy, but good, cool sense told him that it would be better to dismount and open rapid-fire than to go charging recklessly into combat against the three killers.

"Just a minute hoss! We'll show the coyotes something!"

He threw himself from his blue, speckled mustang and brought his carbine to his shoulder. The next instant he received a fresh shock.

THERE was a scream of mingled anger and fear. From the stage-coach darted a girl. A man sprang after her, hands reaching. "Stop, or I'll shoot you!" he yelled, but she ran on, and the next instant was lost in the brush.

Surprise had caused Lan Donaldson to hold his fire, but now his brown cheek fell again to the rifle stock:

"You dirty—" He fired almost pointblank, but Lan was a crack-shot. The man in pursuit of the girl went down and he hit the dirt on his face, arms outflung, hat twisting awry.

The rider with the black domino released the prancing team and wheeled. Instantly the coach-horses bolted. The rider shoved his six-gun away and whipped out a rifle. The other masked bandit catapulted through one of the fanning doors of the careening vehicle. He went tumbling, but the next instant was up and running. Both he and the rider began shooting as they made for the brush.

The rider had thrown himself down against his mount's side and was firing across its neck, and so Lan cut loose at the man who was on the ground. That bandit stumbled, then the fellow straightened up and went plunging into the brush.

The careening stage overturned at a bend and struck a hummock of rock. The vehicle was smashed. The terrified team went flying on, dragging

doubletree and singletrees, and a broken forepart of the shattered coach.

Lan flicked only a glance over the sprawled human forms as he reached the scene of tragedy. His blue horse carried him hurtling on and into the brush. Thorns scratched his flesh and his apparel. Switches whipped his face. The next instant he was out in an opening. He yanked up and swung a glance about him, but did not see either of the bandits. He whirled as a feminine voice called: "Cowboy: Oh, cowboy!"

The girl who had escaped from the stage had darted out of the chaparral, and was running toward him. He cried as he recognized her: "Celia Edwards! What the—"

"They tried to kidnap me! One of them said: 'Come on, you're going for a ride into Mexico!' "

"Which way'd the coyotes go?"

"South, riding hard, but don't leave me here alone! You'd never catch them in the brush anyway."

Celia Edwards was the niece of Don Rafael Eltran, most powerful ranchman of the district. Eltran was American, Castilian, French, Irish; a combination not unusual in the border country. There was only enough Latin blood in Celia's veins to give her a glowing brunette beauty.

Lan sent one glance away in the direction which the two fleeing bandits had taken; then he clipped out: "Stay here hid in the bushes. I'll be right back. Want to investigate the mess out on the trail." He was sparing her the horror of that sight. Wheeling, he headed back for the scene of tragedy.

Lan examined the bodies. The stagemen and the two fallen bandits were dead. He pulled down the masks of the slain robbers and studied their faces. They were strange to him. He found their horses and inspected the brands. The monograms, too, were strange.

Lan straddled leather and rode to the shattered stage. He would get the strongbox, take it to the Eltran ranch, and later turn it over to the Fargo office in town. He was poking about the stagecoach ruins in search of it, when a sharp voice stiffened him: "Don't move, fellow! I've got you covered!"

CHAPTER II

LOOKING INTO A GUNBARREL

IN spite of the order Lan Donaldson turned. What he saw made him stare in surprise; then grin broadly. A wizened, bespectacled man in store-clothes was pointing a pistol at him—or rather that was what he was trying to do. The gun shook violently in his grasp.

"Well, who the heck are you?" Lan inquired.

The cowboy put up his hands and started toward the stranger. Even that slight movement caused the wizened man's panic to increase. "Stop!" he cried, ignoring the lifted hands. "Don't you come near me! You murdering robber! I'll shoot! I swear I will!"

In spite of the threat he was backing away toward the brush, every line of his blanched face expressing terror.

In his excitement he did shoot—or rather the gun went off accidentally. The bullet fanned the cowboy's right ear. Instantly his smile vanished. His uplifted hands jumped higher as he barked: "Hey, for gosh sake, man, be careful with that smokepole! I'm no bandit!"

"No bandit? Who—who are you then?"

Lan briefly explained his part in the

tragic play. The little man's shaking became less violent, but there still was suspicion in the pale, slightly crossed eyes behind the hornrimmed glasses.

Then came an anxious feminine voice: "Mr. Whipple! Mr. Whipple! Please! That's Lan Donaldson! He frustrated the Laughing *Senor's* scheme!"

She was running along the trail. Evidently she had heard the shot and had hastened to see what had happened. The waddy looked again at his captor; sighed in relief when he saw the gun-muzzle lowering.

The girl came up, breathing hard from her run. Explanations were given all around. Whipple was an official of the stageline. He and Celia had been the only passengers. One of the robbers had slugged him. He had recovered, picked himself up out of the wreckage of the stagecoach, seen Lan coming, and thinking him one of the bandits had slipped into the brush and waited. Celia had been on a sudden trip to visit an aunt in El Paso.

"Mr. Whipple, you take the strongbox and the four bodies into town," planned the cowboy. "I'll see Miss Edwards home. She'll have to pick another day to begin her El Paso trip. You folks wait here until I round up that runaway team."

Lan found the stagecoach horses and brought them back. He also brought the mounts of the two dead outlaws. Mr. Whipple set out for town, bearing the strongbox, and leading four horses across which human bodies were draped.

At this moment they heard a clattering of hoofs. A rider was approaching from the direction taken by the two escaped bandits. The thought shot through Lan Donaldson's mind that one of them was returning, determined to get the girl. He yanked out his six-gun and cocked it. "Get away from me!" he ordered Celia. "There may be lead-throwing!"

But at that instant a rider burst out of the brush. "It's Spence Harley!" Celia breathed in relief.

The rider came on and pulled to a halt. He was a well-built, strong, handsome man in dudish range attire. His eyes were blue, his hair and mustache wheat-colored. Harley claimed to be a wealthy cattle buyer.

He glanced at the wrecked stage, then back to the couple before him. "I was looking for a couple of stray horses, when I heard shooting. What happened?"

Celia explained. Harley expressed grave concern: "That Laughing *Senor* has become a public menace. Too bad the law has been unable to track him down. I guess he hides away somewhere in Mexico. Well, come on, Celia, I'll see you home."

"I'm takin' Miss Edwards home," Lan informed him flatly. For a moment their eyes clashed, then Lan reminded dryly: "You were looking for two stray horses, you know."

Spence Harley looked questioningly at Celia. "Yes, Spence, Lan was going to see me home. Thank you, just the same."

Harley whirled his mount angrily and went galloping away. Lan and Celia set out for the Crescent Star Arrow ranch.

"And so you were going without saying good-bye." Lan said in a hurt voice.

HE had loved Celia Edwards from almost the moment when first they had met six months before, but the cowboy had quickly found that he had a powerful rival in wealthy Spence Harley. Moreover there was a reason why Lan Donaldson could

never hope to marry Celia Edwards, a very deep and material reason, one known only to himself.

"Tell me about that feud between the mysterious Laughing *Senor* and your uncle," the cowboy said. "I've never heard all the details."

"He has been a scourge to Don Rafael. The queer thing is, every time he takes anything from uncle he gives or sends a receipt. Claims that the Don once robbed a relative of his, and that when he has taken enough to make up the loss he'll stop his depredations.

"I've seen him only once before today. That was when he robbed uncle Rafael a year ago. He stood suddenly in an inner doorway, a gun in each hand. He stripped uncle of some jewelry and a wallet, then laughing mockingly he backed out of the house. He always wears a black domino and *caballero* costume, and he has a spiked mustache and a goatee—although of course these may be false.

"At first I considered him a sort of Robin Hood who always rode alone, and took only from my uncle, because he'd been robbed by the Don. To be candid, every one knows that my uncle is utterly heartless in his business dealings. He has practically built up his big Crescent Star Arrow spread by robbing others. Well, I told myself that it was no wonder Don Rafael was puzzled as to the *Senor's* identity, since the Don had robbed so many people.

"But my romantic allusions about the Laughing *Senor* have vanished. Now I see him only as the wolf he is. He no longer rides alone, but at the head of a band that commits all sorts of crimes. The one back there for instance. Brutal! Horrible! I suppose he meant to hold me for ransom."

The sun was just reddening the western horizon, and the lavender and mauve of approaching twilight were upon the land as the couple rode up to the Crescent Star Arrow ranch house. In the front yard, two men were seated at a rustic table beneath a shadetree, sipping drinks. Lan recognized them at once as Don Rafael Eltran, and Felix Calcis, stepson of the Don's dead brother.

Don Rafael Eltran was only one-quarter Spanish, but he nevertheless was Spanish in looks, dress, and environment. He was tall and slender. Hair, *mustachios,* and goatee were silvery white in striking contrast to the blackness of his sharp eyes. It was a haughty, patrician visage, with certain cruel lines about the thin lips.

The two men rose wonderingly and hurried to the gate to meet the cowboy and the girl. "Why Ceily! What's this?" exclaimed the old ranchman. "What happened?"

Lan swung down and assisted Celia Edwards to alight; then they told about the stage holdup. The Don's black eyes flamed. He breathed a fierce imprecation; then rapped out: "We've got to get that accursed Laughing *Senor!*"

"We certainly have," agreed Felix Calcis. He was a well formed young man with bold features. His eyes were dark gray, with peculiarly large pupils and heavy black rings about the colored portions. One-quarter Spanish, three-quarters American, was Felix Calcis. He had come to the Crescent Star Arrow from Mexico three years ago, to help his uncle manage the huge ranch, and try to stop the depredations of the mysterious Laughing *Senor.* He had quickly shown himself to be a fearless, quickdraw rider, who knew the cattle business from hoof to horns.

"I suppose the bandits meant to

hold you for ransom," the Don told his niece. "Damn that laughing scalawag! I'll pay a thousand dollars for his capture."

THE peculiar black rimmed eyes of Felix Calcis fixed themselves upon the thin face of the irate old Don: "Some day I'll call on you to make good that promise, Uncle Rafael."

"I'll be glad to," snapped the Don, "but don't be too long about making me do it."

"Here comes Stager," Felix broke off. They all turned and looked at a rider who had just emerged from a stand of mesquite three hundred yards away. Lan's wide mouth became a steeltrap. He and the Crescent Star Arrow foreman had never got along.

Bert Stager rode up, swung down, and joined the group at the yard gate. He gave Lan just a cold glance; then said to the girl: "Why are you back, Celia?"

Stager was a smoky-eyed, hard-jawed, bitter-mouthed *hombre;* sparing of words, but blunt when he did speak. He had been at the Crescent Star Arrow for two years. His life prior to that time was shrouded in mystery, for he would never talk about his past. He was known to be a hard man, though, as was attested by three notches on his gun. A puckered bullet scar along his right cheekbone indicated that at least one of his victims had nearly got him.

"That devil, the Laughing *Senor,* and three of his Mex gang tried to kidnap me," Celia explained to the foreman. "The two stage riders were killed and the stage wrecked. I escaped into the brush. Lan came along and brought me home."

"By the way, Stager," Lan asked gently, "where've *you* been? Thought the Crescent Star Arrow was on roundup right now."

The foreman turned venomous eyes upon him. He said nothing, just stared, his mouth a hard welt. Don Rafael spoke up quickly:

"Oh, Bert has been up to see if it's safe to try to shove the beef herd across Devil Creek. The recent rains have made the stream quicky. Felix did all the bossing at the roundup camp today. He came in a short while ago to tell me the work's finished, and the cattle ready to move."

Stager was yet staring at Lan. The hardfaced foreman had never liked Lan Donaldson, perhaps for the reason that he knew Celia Edwards did. Now Stager spoke, and there was iron bluntness in his voice:

"Sort of significant, your showing up so soon after the crime, Donaldson. Come to think of it, that shirt-tail ranch of yours is growing mighty fast. How do we know you're not one of the *Senor's* band?"

Lan's dark eyes flamed. The bronze on his square-jawed face turned to red. "Bert Stager," he rapped out, "you'll eat them words."

His hands knotted into rock-hard fists, and he started for the foreman. The next instant he froze. In a flash Stager's gun had come from its holster and was pointing straight at his middle. Lan steeled himself for the shock of the bullet.

CHAPTER III

GUNMEN IN HIDING

"BACK up, cowboy," Stager rasped out, "or I'll gutshoot you!"

"Stop it, you two!" Celia Edwards cried sharply, and she flung her slim

form between them. She turned fiery dark eyes upon Stager's grim face: "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Bert! If it hadn't been for Lan those kidnapers would have got me! I didn't tell you all! He shot down two of them and chased the other two! That should prove even to a nitwit that he couldn't possibly be one of the *Senor's* band!"

The word, "nitwit," stung the foreman. His usually inscrutable face went pale, and his nostrils pinched; but he said nothing.

"Put up that gun!" the Don ordered crisply. "And hit the trail for the roundup camp, pronto! With that marauding devil, the Laughing *Senor* on the loose again, you are needed out there! Twice before the villain has stampeded my herds at roundup time, and driven off some of my cattle!"

Stager shoved his gun away, and turned silently to his horse. He mounted and rode without once looking back. Soon he was lost in the dusk, and the mesquite.

Don Rafael now turned to Lan: "Forgive him, Donaldson, he's just blunt that way." Don Rafael was deeply grateful to the cowboy for having saved Celia from the bandits; moreover, he was known to be a perfect host, even though he was a mean, crooked old cuss.

"I reckon it was my fault," conceded Lan. "I prodded the fella; but —well, he is about the *Senor's* size."

Felix laughed shortly. "So are you. So am I. So is that dude cattle buyer, Spence Harley. So are many other men in this community." There was scarcely better feeling between Felix and Lan, than there was between the young ranchman and Bert Stager, only it was more subtle. Perhaps this cold dislike, too, was due chiefly to jealousy. Felix went on belittlingly:

"Your suspicions are ridiculous, Donaldson. How could Bert Stager be the Laughing *Senor*, and him living right here among us on the ranch?"

"But the foreman on this spread lives apart from the other hands—has a shack all his own. He could easy slip out nights—and from what I hear, all the *Senor's* devilment, except for that dirty trick today, has been done at night-time."

"*Dios*, that is right!" exclaimed the Don, suspicion flashing across his sharp features. "And after all, we know nothing of Stager's past!"

But again Felix made light of the suspicion. He fixed his strange, shadowy-gray eyes upon Lan's cleancut face, and said with a slight Spanish purr in his voice, the while the vaguest kind of a peculiar smile flitted about his lips: "Uncle Rafael has offered a thousand for the *Senor's* capture, Donaldson. I intend to earn that reward. And by the way, for all we know the fellow in the *caballero* attire and the black domino at the stage holdup today, might not have been the genuine Laughing *Senor* at all, but a bogus one—for some purpose."

Lan nodded soberly, the while he rolled a quirley. "Somethin' in that, Felix. I'll keep it in mind. Maybeso I'll earn that reward my ownself."

The Don cut in: "Felix, you'd better ride to the roundup camp too. You can supper there. Donaldson, will you honor me by coming into the houses for some wine and cakes?"

Lan accepted. Felix turned obediently and headed for the corral.

THE delicacies were served by Manuelita, a stolid Mexican woman. As the two men and the girl sipped wine and tasted dainty cakes, Lan Donaldson noted that the cloud of anxiety on the old *caballero's* thin,

pale face was deepening. Finally Don Rafael said:

"I'm going to the roundup camp myself. The more I think, the more uneasy I become. Donaldson, will you do me a favor?"

"Name it, *Senor.*"

"I don't want to leave Celia alone with just Manuelita and Pedro, that useless, broken down husband of hers. Not after what happened today. Will you stay here tonight? I'm willing to pay—"

The Don was forever thinking of money. "Please don't talk about pay, Don Rafael," said Lan. "Shore I'll stay, but first I must go home and attend to a few chores. It won't take me long."

"*Gracias, Senor!* I'll stay until you return."

Lan rose, took his big Stetson, and tramped briskly from the room. "In just a little while," he called back from the flagstoned walk. "*Adios.*" A moment later he was galloping away into the early night.

Lan was glum and thoughtful as he loped along. His recent nearness to Celia Edwards, amidst an environment of domesticity, had both warmed and saddened his heart. He had imagined that sweet girl, the girl whom he loved silently, fervently, placed in his own little home. And as he imagined it, the lonely atmosphere in his humble dwelling vanished, and the small house bloomed. That was what saddened, for once more he told himself that Celia could never be his—because of that prime reason known only to himself.

He was half way home, when he was startled from his sombre reflections by the sudden snorting and shying aside of his bronc. Lan glimpsed a man under a great *sombrero*, rising from behind a clump of chaparral, throwing down with a six-gun.

Instantly he flung himself to a side of his mount. Two guns popped. There was a killer hidden on the other side of the trail, too. The bullets whiffed viciously over the thigh which remained in the saddle. Lan gouged with his spurs as he flipped out his own weapon.

As his horse snorted again and leaped, he fired under the animal's neck. The gunman who had risen from behind the chaparral clump went tumbling backward. A bullet from the other side skimmed over his bent form and whacked wickedly against the saddle fork.

Lan had no idea of running out of the gunfight. He now whirled his leaping mount and drove with his spurs, charging straight for the thicket from which the second gunman had fired. He went tearing into the greasewood, gun ready, but he saw no one. Evidently the second gunman had no stomach to fight it out man to man. Lan plunged here and there among the greasewood; then paused to listen. Just once he caught a faint running of hoofs; then the sound was gone. He could not even tell from what direction it had come.

Cautiously, gun still held ready, he rode back to the clump of chaparral. A man was lying there, a limp, broken-looking thing. The cowboy got down and bent over the inert form. There was no need to feel for a pulse. He saw at a glance that the chance bullet which he had thrown had drilled the fellow squarely in the middle of the forehead. A dark flow was welling from the bullet hole and streaking across the brow.

Lan popped a match and studied the face. It was that of a heavily mustached Mexican. He immediately

recognized one of the men who had escaped from the scene of the stage holdup. "Looking for revenge," muttered Lan, as the light died.

He stood up, and for a moment was statue-like, gazing down at the grotesque form at his feet. There lay a gruesome lifeless thing which a moment before had been a living human being! It gave him a queer, ghostly feeling. He hated this killing business.

SOMEWHERE an owl hooted eerily. As if curious, yet timid, the moon peeped over a hill. From a far-off hogback came the lonely *woo—woo—woo* of a disconsolate lobo. The sound aroused Lan Donaldson to activity. He gathered stones and brush and covered the body, so that it would not be bothered by carnivorous birds or animals. Tomorrow he would ride to town and report to the coroner.

He searched around and located the slain man's horse. He hitched it to a mesquite, then went back to his own mount. Still with a weird sort of feeling in his heart, he swung to leather and resumed his journey homeward.

He dropped the reins at the front gate, got down, and went bowlegging toward the dark little house. Suddenly he froze, and his right hand went streaking for his six-gun. A man had risen from a shadowy side of the porch and stepped toward him.

"Wait!" a voice called sharply. "What the hell?"

Lan came out of his crouch and slid his gun back into its holster. He had recognized the other as Spence Harley, the dude cattle buyer.

"What's eating you?" the man asked anxiously. "Why so quick with the six shooter?"

Lan told him about the gunfight back on the trail. "I thought you might be the one who got away."

Harley expressed grave curiosity, and asked a good many questions. Lan finally inquired: "What are you doing here, Harley?"

The fellow hesitated. Standing there in the moonlight, thumbs hooked in the buckle-strap of his fancy chaps, he looked down at the ground and raked at a stone with a polished boot-toe. His lips were pursed, his brow corrugated. Then he touched his spiked blond mustache and flashed his blue eyes up to the suspicious face of the man before him:

"I have a proposition to make, Donaldson. How much will you take for this ranch—and you leave the country?"

Lan studied him deliberately for a moment; then: "The girl, huh?" Again Harley raked at the stone with the polished boot-toe. He nodded: "With you out of the way I might win her."

The cowboy's mouth curled contemptuously. "H a r l e y, you're a skunk."

The man came to life instantly. He threw a hand to his gun. The blue eyes flamed in the moonlight: "Take that back, Donaldson, or draw!"

Lan bent forward and studied the rigid visage: "By God, Harley, you're no sissy, even if you do wear dude clothes! I'm a-wonderin'."

"Wondering what!"

Lan grinned: "All right, mister, I apologize. Can a fella do more?"

The other took his right hand from the gun-butt; said softly: "I have a right to wear what I like, Donaldson. I like fancy clothes. But what about my proposition?"

"If I didn't know it would mean a gunfight, and death—for somebody," Lan said calmly, still studying the face by the moonlight, "I'd stick to

the statement you're a skunk for mentioning such a thing. I'm here to stay, Harley. I like the country. But as far as Celia Edwards is concerned, you don't need to be worried none about me. I'm not good enough to kiss her little boots. Even if I were, I wouldn't, couldn't ask her to marry me. There's a reason."

"What reason?" It was Harley who was peering closely now.

"That's my business."

Harley turned away: "Well, if you change your mind—" He waved a hand, strode down the walk; fancy chaps flapping, ornate spurs clinking.

There was a flash of silver cochas, and he was gone into the moonlight.

Lan mused aloud as he looked at the dim, departing figure: "Just about the size of the fella in the domino, and the fancy *caballero* clothes! Queer jasper, Harley! And he'll fight. Quick to the gun, too. I wonder!"

CHAPTER IV

LAUGHING SENOR STRIKES AGAIN

DON RAFAEL ELTRAN paced the floor, his high, narrow brow corrugated in worry, his slim fingers nervously playing with his silvery goatee. His white hair stood up in a belligerent bush, and his *mustachios* protruded rigidly. Celia Edwards sat in an armchair, mending a dainty stocking and occasionally eyeing him. "Why so much worry, uncle?" she finally asked. "You act as though you *knew* the Laughing *Senor* were going to strike again tonight."

He whirled upon her, thrust out his bony chin: "Certainly I know it! The laughing, taunting devil! Has he ever failed? He has an uncanny way of learning when I have much to lose! Listen, Celia!"

He went very close, said huskily: "I have five thousand dollars in the safe tonight!"

"Uncle—"

"Yes! There is one who would give me a rare bargain in cattle tomorrow—for quick money!"

"Wet cattle." She said flatly, and looked at him accusingly.

"Cattle," he evaded. "Now I'm not particularly uneasy about the money, for I'm certain no one except the bank and we two know I drew it. The banker handed it to me in his private office. Where I fear the Laughing *Senor* might strike, is out at the roundup camp. I don't want to wait any longer, Celia. Do you mind if I leave at once? Lan Donaldson will be here soon, you know, and you'll have Manuelita and Pedro."

She agreed very quietly, the while she continued to mend the delicate length of chiffon: "All right, Uncle Rafael, just as you say. I am not afraid." But to herself she was saying: "The old skinflint! Thinking more of his beef than of his niece!"

"*Gracias*, Ceily! I knew you would understand! Good girl! Smart girl!" He hurried away for his riding apparel and his hardware.

The clock on the mantelpiece ticked off the seconds. Time dragged. Manuelita and Pedro had retired. Celia Edwards smiled wistfully as she mended and thought of Lan Donaldson. Why was he so long in getting back—but after all, it had been a little while. She must be patient. She loved Lan Donaldson—the wistful smile deepened. But why didn't he ask her for that love? Many times she had seen it in his sombre eyes—yet he had never asked her. What was that something far back in his mind? That something which kept him from declaring his love for her?

"Ah, *senorita!* Again we meet! No?"

She tensed, jerked up her head. That voice! The Laughing *Senor!*

He was crouched on silver-spurred heels in a broad Spanish window, a pearl-handled six-gun in each hand. The even teeth between the black goatee and the spiked mustache gleamed in the lamplight. A great, silver-spangled *sombrero* shadowed the eyes, which drilled her through slits in the domino.

She laid aside her sewing and rose very slowly. Intently she studied him. There was something vaguely familiar about him, but—who?

"Well, what do you want here?" she asked very calmly. But wildly she was telling herself how foolish she had been to leave her .38 six-gun on the table ten feet away.

He sprang lightly down into the room and stood before her. He swept off the silver-braided *sombrero,* and bowed low, still smiling. There was a handkerchief of yellow silk tied over his head. When he straightened up again the mountainous *sombrero* was on again—and the face shadowed.

"I suppose that you and your cutthroat band have come to kidnap me," she said icily.

"No, no; *senorita mia!* You do not understand! I am as always ride alone! And I kom not to keednap the pretty *senorita,* although in faith I should like to." He laughed softly.

"Alone, as always! Hah! You weren't alone when the stage was held up and those two faithful old hands brutally murdered!"

His smile vanished. He came close; said in a low, thrumming voice: "Again these wan who masquerade as me has struck! Some day I weel find heem, and keel him dead. I, the true Laughing *Senor,* ride always alone, and tak' only from your onkle, who have rob a kinsman of mine."

Strangely, she found herself believing him. Strangely, too, she found her heart beating fast, just as it had when she had seen him before. He fascinated her, this mysterious one; a sort of incomprehensible hypnosis. In that moment she even forgot Lan Donaldson.

"Then why have you come here tonight?" she found herself asking breathlessly.

AGAIN the flashing smile: "To wans more rob your onkle. I am know that een hees safe is five tousan' dollar, weech he have weethdraw these morning to buy shady cattle from wan mesterious Jose Duvalo, and no questions asked. What the so shrewd and conscienceless Don Rafael Eltran do not know, ees that these Duvalo wan, I have pay heem to lie. He have not the cattle for sale. I want only that the monee she ees weethdraw, so I can tak' her. And now, *Senorita,* if you weel so kindly lead the way to the safe and open eet."

"I don't know the combination."

Once more the soft laugh. "Sooch sweet lips should not lie. I am know for positive that the *Senorita* does know the combination."

"You seem to have a way of knowing everything."

"Ah, *Senorita,* you flatter! But now—the safe."

"I wouldn't open it for you if I could. I'm not afraid of you."

He struck an arm across his chest and bowed again. "I admire the brave *Senorita,* but I theenk you are as wise as you are courage. Here I have the dynamite." He pulled back a side of his fancy *bolero,* showing several fused sticks, thrust under his blue and

red striped sash. "If you do not make the open, I shall blast; theen the house she is wreck. So ees the eexpeensive safe. You zee I mus' have my way, *Senorita,* so ees eet you open, or muz I make the blast?"

"I will open it. I can see you will have your way. There is no need of having the house and the safe blasted, and losing the money, too." She took the lamp and led him into the office.

She set the lamp on top of the big steelbox, knelt, began twirling the dial. Reflected in that metal disk was the grinning visage of the Laughing *Senor,* and in each hand he yet held an ornate six-gun. Again she told herself: "He fascinates me! I feel my heart racing! My blood is like wine, even while he is robbing my uncle. Why?"

She worked slowly. Hoping, yet dreading that Lan Donaldson would come. He would plunge into an immediate gunfight, she knew, and who would win? Her heart cried out at the thought that Lan might be killed; yet, queerly enough, she didn't want this handsome Robin Hood to be slain, either.

Celia Edwards opened the safe and then stood aside. The grinning *Senor's* tread was like that of a cat as he approached and took a fat sheaf of bills from the strongbox. One of the ornate six-guns, he had shoved into a silver studded holster. Now once more he swept off his great *sombrero* and bowed low:

"Sweet *Senorita,* I leave you. Much the 'blige, and same to the onkle. Tell heem here ees the *recibo.*" He tossed a slip of paper. It fluttered to the floor. He backed to the door, gun menacing. There he stopped, pulled the bundle of fused sticks from his gaudy sash, and dropped them onto the floor. Softly he laughed; then said: "For the pretty *Senorita,* a souvenir."

She heard the swift tripping of his booted feet along the hallway and through the front room. While she still stood rigidly, came a drumming of hoofs; then a wild, mocking laugh. The next moment there was dead silence. The Laughing *Senor* had struck again, and was gone.

She picked up the slip of paper which had fluttered to the floor. It read:

"Receip—five tousan dollar on account. Balance, eight tousan, four hunner dollar, sixty-tree *centavos. Gracias!*

THE LAUGHING SENOR"

Next she went to the bundle of fused sticks which he had dropped, and bending, she took them into her firm little hands. "Not dynamite at all!" she spoke aloud. "Just a sawed-up broomstick! The daring scalawag!"

She did not waken Manuelita and Pedro. What could they do? A bit dazedly Celia returned to the parlor, sat down, resumed her mending. There was a queer, detached expression on her oval face. Her uncle—old skinflint who held money above all else! How he would rave when he learned that the clever Laughing *Senor* had robbed the *hacienda* while its owner was on his way to the roundup camp to guard against a raid!

Why hadn't Lan Donaldson come? Had something happened to him on the trail? Mexican bandits were vengeful fellows.

Suddenly she jerked up her brown, curly head. Out of the night came a thudding of hoofs. She got up, went to the door, opened it, looked out. Silhouetted dimly against the moonlight was a galloping rider. He was

coming from the direction of Lan Donaldson's little ranch, still—

She turned back, took a 30-30 Winchester from a rack of steer horns, and levered a cartridge into the firing chamber. With the rifle in her hands, she slipped into a dark hallway and waited.

CHAPTER V

A TERRIBLE EXPERIENCE

THE hoofbeats ceased. The tensely waiting, listening girl heard a tramping of boots, a *clink-clink-clinking* of spurs. There was a knock on the door: "Who is it?" she called sharply.

"Me, Lan," a cheerful voice called back. She sighed with relief: hastened to return the rifle to its rack; then she went to the door.

"I'm so glad you've come!" she said as she let him in. "The Laughing *Senor* was here again!"

"No!"

"Yes!" and rapidly she told what had happened. He stared for a moment; then burst into a staccato laugh. "Pardon me, Ceily, but even though what happened is too bad, it's sorter funny—yore uncle rushin' away to help guard his herd, and the *Senor* grabbin' the opportunity to rob the house!"

"The Don will just about go crazy when he learns. Between us, Lan—we both know my uncle is a heartless skinflint. Maybe it's strange," she said slowly, "but somehow I believe that picturesque Laughing *Senor* and don't blame him so much."

Still in a detached mood she went on: "He fascinates me strangely, Lan. It's queer, but—" She described the peculiar feelings she had when the mysterious Robin Hood of the range was near.

Lan Donaldson laughed again: "You women folks are funny! Imagine Ceily Edwards bein' fascinated by the scamp who for three years has been robbin' her uncle! A Dashin' Spanish *caballero* whose face she ain't never even seen complete!"

He went closer, placed his hands on her soft shoulders. Soberly he said: "You make somebody jealous, Ceily, I—"

He stopped abruptly, and his mouth tightened. An expression of pain came into his earnest dark eyes.

She looked up quickly, eagerly: "Make who jealous, Lan? What were you going to say?"

He said lifelessly: "I was thinkin' of Spence Harley, and Felix Calcis, and Bert Stager. They're all three crazy about you, girl."

The eager glow went out of her dark eyes. Suddenly she laid a small brown hand on his arm, looked pleadingly into his bronzed face. Her voice trembled as she said impulsively: "Lan, don't you—"

She bit her lip. The little hand dropped away.

"Don't I what, Ceily?" His voice was very gentle, a little sad.

A bit coldly she said: "I was going to say, don't you want to ride with me to the roundup camp? I must tell my uncle—tonight."

"Just as you say, Ceily," he agreed quietly.

Soon the cowboy and the girl were on the trail. Lan told her about the attempt to drygulch him. She was shocked. He said: "I'll ride to town and notify the sheriff, soon as I've seen you safe back home."

The moon was a huge silver concha. The stars were diamonds, strewn carelessly on a dark cloth. In the west was a great cloud, sullen, threatening.

Lightning streaked and flickered on that black wall. Thunder muttered. Lan cast occasional glances aside at his little trail-partner, and each time that he looked at her a melancholy, hopeless ache came into his heart. "Not for Lan Donaldson," he kept telling himself silently. "It can never be."

WHEN they arrived at the camp-site they found only a dying campfire. The wagon was gone, the stock was gone, the men were gone. "That's queer," said Celia. "I wonder where they are."

Lan Donaldson was listening. To his keen sense of hearing came a distant bawling of cattle. "They're over there to the west, Ceily. Don't you hear them?"

She listened for a moment, and then: "Yes, I hear them now. For some reason the herd is being moved. Come, let's catch up with the outfit." Again they rode.

Over a mile more of moonlit, sage-dotted plain they galloped, and toward uplands that stood like giant anthills against the horizon. The constantly clearing sounds of bawling cattle and whooping riders finally guided them into a great, natural trough, that was densely clouded on both slopes with brush and scrub timber. Ahead, they saw a vast moving blotch—riders and a herd. A sudden strong wind that was heavy with the rich smell of rain, came out of the west.

Don Rafael Eltran, Felix Calcis, and a *vaquero* were riding drag. "Why are you here? What has happened?" the Don asked sharply as the cowboy and the girl came up. Celia explained. The five of them had stopped their horses. Don Rafael sat his saddle straight and rigid for a moment; then he went into a terrible rage. He flung his arms and cursed in two languages. He shook clenched fists toward the heavens and swore that he would have the Laughing *Senor's* blood. He even unreasonably bemeaned Celia for opening the safe, and Lan for not getting back to the *hacienda* earlier. They just let him rave. His sharp, black eyes were fiery in the moonlight. His slim visage with its thin, highbridged nose was like that of an enraged eagle.

Suddenly he calmed. "Forgive me," he said to his niece and the cowboy. "But—some day I will capture the Laughing *Senor*, and when I do I will tear his heart out." There was deadly determination in his voice.

"How come you're movin' the cows?" Lan changed the subject.

"I'd already started them, when the Don caught up with us," Felix put in. "It's going to storm—an ideal night for the *Senor* to raid. Up here two miles ahead is a great natural corral, with only one small outlet. I thought it well to take the cattle there, so they can be easily held. But now, since the cursed Laughing *Senor* has already struck—"

He broke off, and jerked out an exclamation. Up ahead, fires suddenly had sprung into existence in the brush on both sides of the great trough.

Again Don Rafael Eltran became an enraged eagle. "The Laughing *Senor* again!" he screamed, then shouted imprecations against the mysterious bandit.

Whipped by the wild wind which now was blowing through the long pass, the fires began gutting the hillsides, spreading like mad through the dense brushclouds.

"Get Celia out of here!" Felix yelled at Lan. "The rest of us will try

to hold the cattle to the barren, rocky bed! I'll ride ahead and speak to the other boys!" He socked spurs to his mount and went drilling into the night.

Lan Donaldson grabbed Celia's bridle and whirled both her mount and his own, but the next instant he was swearing softly. Fires had been started behind, too, and they were raging even more swiftly than those at the front of the marching herd. The flames were spreading like vast puddles of molten metal spilled upon the earth.

"Up the hillside with her, before the fires cut you off!" Don Rafael screamed at Lan.

The order was unnecessary. Lan already had again whirled both his mount and Celia's and now he and the girl went charging straight for the nearest slope.

Up to this second she had said not a word, since the first fire had been seen. Now she spoke very quietly to Lan: "The brush and rocks are pretty thick up there. You lead the way. I'll follow."

MOUNTS pawing, snorting, tearing through brush and weaving among snaggled rocks, the cowboy and the girl went up the slope. The night suddenly had become wild, terrible. The cloud in the west was a colossal black wall that now and then glared, or was riven by crooked, quivering serpents of light. Thunder boomed through the skies like Gargantuan wagons rolling over rocky roads. The ever quickening wind was sending flames rushing at racehorse speed through the mingled dry brush and high grass. The fires hissed, crackled, snarled. Sparks swarmed like myriad glowflies. Red glares played along the slopes, sending eerie, fantastic shadows dancing among the bushes and scrub trees.

And down there in the canyon, completely enveloped by all these things of terror, the herd had gone insane. The string of marching bodies had quickly rolled into a confused, agitated mass, that now was breaking to bits and scattering madly in all directions. Bellows of fright and pain rent the storm threatening air. Men yelled. Guns popped. Through the smoke that was rolling along the long pass, could be seen darting forms of riders and cowbrutes. The earth trembled to a pounding of hoofs. Brush was crashing everywhere.

"It's awful!" Celia called to Lan, her voice a little shaky now. He spoke back quietly: "She is, but don't let her get you."

At that instant his horse lost its feet and went over on its side. Celia let out a half stifled scream. He flung himself quickly out of his saddle, but held on to the reins. The animal rolled completely over twice; then brought up against a scrub cedar. With a strong pull on the reins he helped the pony to regain its feet. The next moment he was again in the saddle and fighting his way up the slope. This time Celia was in the lead.

On a large barren spot at the rimrock they stopped. Sitting their saddles there they watched in silent awe. Through rifts in the smoke they could see cattle tearing madly through flames; others charging both ways along the canyon floor. Could see horsemen giving up all attempt to do anything with the cattle, and riding for their lives. But they were only flitting shadows, those human forms, and so the watching pair could not tell who was who.

The moon in the east, looked on in silent awe. The black cloud in the west boomed in excitement, and once more sent weird lightning flickering, searching over the terrible scene.

And then both Lan Donaldson and Celia jerked taut in their saddles. Somewhere down there in the canyon a man was laughing loudly, wildly, mockingly. They looked at each other. Celia said huskily: "The Laughing *Senor!*"

CHAPTER VI

SUSPICIONS

TWO of Don Rafael Eltran's *vaqueros* died that wild night, one from a forty-five calibre slug through the brain, the other from a horrible trampling by fear-frenzied cattle. Once more did the fiery old Don swear vengeance against the Laughing *Senor*. His riders scoured the country for some trace of the criminal band, but found none. The storm had erased all hoofmarks. It took two weeks to re-gather the scattered cattle. And then after a week came a mocking letter. It read:

"Receip—Fifty heads the cattle, at forty dollar the head—Two tousan dollar. Balance due me, six tousan four huner dollar, sixty-tree *centavos. Gracias!*

THE LAUGHING SENOR"

In a group, Lan, Celia, Don Rafael, Felix, Bert Stager, and Spence Harley all studied the slip of paper, comparing it with others which had been received. In all cases the writing was in crude print, but Lan pointed out a slight difference in those which had come after a lone-wolf raid, and the ones following a foray by a band.

"I'm plumb convinced there are two Laughing *Senores*. The original one rides always alone, and takes only from Don Rafael Eltran. The other a masquerader who rides at the head of a cutthroat band, and commits all sorts of crimes in the other's name."

"But who's who?" queried the dudish Spence Harley, as he touched his spiked blond mustache.

Lan Donaldson looked him straight in the eyes. "That's what I'd like to know. Harley met his gaze squarely. Lan's drilling brown eyes turned to Bert Stager's hard, inscrutable face. The fellow's thin lips tightened, and he stared back in a defiant way. Lan's gaze shifted to Felix Calcis' strong-cut face. It flushed a little and the peculiar blackringed eyes glinted. He said sharply:

"Why stare at me, Donaldson? A person would think you suspect me!"

"Hold yore bronc, Felix, I'm doin' no accusin'."

"I offered a thousand for the Laughing *Senor,*" Don Rafael said curtly. "If there are two of them, I'll double it—a thousand for each."

"I'm taking a little time off and going after that money," Bert Stager declared flatly.

"I'm going to try for it, too," Spence Harley said, and he gave Lan a keen, surreptitious glance.

Felix laughed and remarked: "A fellow could almost afford to give himself up for a thousand dollars." His staring, blackringed eyes swiftly searched the faces of the other men in succession. It was plain that the series of bold crimes had made all suspicious of every one else.

News of Don Rafael Eltran's reward offer spread rapidly, and a great manhunt was put on for the two Laughing *Senores*. Men scoured the rough country in search of outlaw sign. Others did quiet, but intensive detective work in the tough towns, along both sides of the border.

Celia had given up the idea of visiting in El Paso. She was still afraid of another kidnap attempt.

One day Felix came to his stepuncle with a proposition: "I have a plan for getting one, maybe both Laughing *Senores*. I'll tell you about it, provided you'll promise to pay me the reward money if we succeed in trapping one or both of them."

The Don readily agreed; then Felix explained: "You go to town with an armed party. Pretend to get tipsy. Let it slip here and there that you have a big cash deal on. Go to the bank and pretend to draw a large amount of gold, but in reality bring out a bag of washers which the banker has prepared. Put it rather openly into a saddle-bag and ride for home. Maybe the *Senores*, or one of them will come to rob you. I'll stand guard with a shotgun, in a dark room."

The Don nodded thoughtfully. "It is worth trying. Hit the trail for town early in the morning and tell the banker to have the bag ready. I will ride in with a guard a short time later and do my part."

AND so the next morning Felix saddled up and rode for town. Don Rafael left an hour later, attended by Bert Stager and six other riders. He had told them he would bring back some money, and wanted them to guard him. He was not letting them in on the real secret. For all he knew the Laughing *Senores* might be members of his own crew. Take Bert Stager for instance: There was something very mysterious about the foreman. The Don had tried anew to pry into the man's past, but as always before had run up against a cold wall of reserve.

It was Saturday, and most everybody was in town that day. Lan Donaldson saw Don Rafael Eltran, sitting straight up in his saddle and accompanied by his cavalcade, ride out of town about mid-afternoon. The young ranchman also observed that Spence Harley was leaning against a porchpost on the other side of the street, also watching the band of riders depart. A short time later Harley forked his own mount and left in another direction.

Lan frowned thoughtfully. He had heard the Don mention tipsily in the Bulldog Saloon that he had a big cash deal coming up. So had Harley. So had several others. Lan had seen the old *caballero* come out of the bank, openly carrying a money bag, and shove it into a saddle pocket. So had Harley. So had others. And now Harley was leaving town.

"Huh!" muttered Lan. "I wonder." Still frowning thoughtfully he tossed away his cigarette stub, turned, and walked slowly into the Bulldog.

Lan got back to his little ranch shortly before sundown. As he reached the corral gate he saw a rider just disappearing into a faroff stretch of mesquite. It looked like Harley, on his dappled gray. Had Harley been to see him again? If so, about what?

He put up his horse and went to the house. In the middle of the front room of the two-roomed shack he stopped short and looked quickly about. Then he strode into the kitchen. Again he sent darting glances. He swore softly. Apparently everything was as usual, still, his keen dark eyes detected that the shack had been thoroughly searched.

For a moment he stood stroking his chin, gazing absently at the floor, and then once more: "Huh! I wonder!"

CHAPTER VII

THE ROBIN HOOD CAPTURED

AS the sun went down and blue darkness settled over the land, there were three anxious people in the *hacienda* of Don Rafael Eltran—the Don, his niece, and Felix Calcis. Once more a thunderstorm was threatening, and this situation was not at all to the liking of any of the three. With moonlight flooding the night, it would be easy for watchful eyes to spot a skulker before he could get near the house, but with a storm raging, it might not be difficult for a bandit to slip into the dwelling unobserved.

The Don, in green, tight fitting Mexican pants, striped sash, gray silk shirt and brown velvet smoking-jacket, sat apparently at ease, a pipe in one hand and a book in the other. But under his smoking-jacket there was a gun in a shoulder holster. At his right hand was another, shoved down into the upholstery. Although he seemed to be giving his whole attention to the book in his hand, and the wine at his elbow, he in reality was listening keenly for the slightest hostile sound.

Felix, armed with two six-shooters and a shotgun, was hidden in the dark office. Its door was open so that he could keep watch into the great library and upon the Don. Outside, on each side of the house was a guard. Don Rafael had picked the four most trustworthy of his old hands for the job. He had not let Bert Stager know that they were there. They supposedly had gone into town for a spree, but secretly had returned and taken up their posts.

Manuelita and Pedro were in dining room and kitchen, wrangling back and forth in staccato Spanish as they worked.

Celia Edwards had gone to her own room. The men feared there might be danger for her below. She had not made a light, but was sitting by a window, from which she could see both the foreman's shack and the trail that led away toward the cabin which Spence Harley had been occupying alone since he had come to that country.

Time dragged, nothing happened. Manuelita and Pedro climbed the stairs and went to bed, blissfully unaware of the grim wait which was going on within that great, Spanish-style house. The snarling thunder in the west was becoming ever nearer. Occasionally pale flickers of lightning played eerily upon the dark landscape. After a while the moon came up and began its weary climb. More time crawled by; still nothing happened.

Celia dropped off to sleep. Downstairs the Don and Felix were still grimly, determinedly at their posts. So were the four guards outside. Now and then Don Rafael got up and went to a window. So did Felix.

The moon climbed still higher; then was swallowed by the ominous black cloud. Instantly the world was plunged into heavy gloom, save that occasionally the blackness was swept away for seconds by flashes of lightning.

Midnight came, Celia awoke, yawned, got up. She went down and talked with her uncle. After a while he irritably ordered her to go to bed.

She went back upstairs, clothed her exquisite body in a pair of silk pajamas, and turned in. Within half an hour she was fast asleep, despite the storm that now was raging outside.

And then it happened!

A flash of lightning disclosed a human figure crouched on the little iron-fenced balcony outside a pair of double Spanish windows of Celia's bedroom. The man was prying at the lock. The lightning glittered on the silver spangles of his sombrero, and glistened sleekly on the rain-drenched black slicker he wore. When the next flash of lightning came, the human figure was gone, and the windows were closing gently.

Down in the library Don Rafael was pacing, and chafing, for he was about ready to admit that the plan had failed. He called irritably to Felix. "I'll go upstairs and see if Ceily turned in like I ordered her to. There's no sense in her sitting up." The only thing in the world that the cruel old robber loved besides money, was his pretty niece.

"When I come back," the Don went on, "I'd better pretend I've fallen asleep in my chair, otherwise if that clever devil does come he'll be suspicious at my being up so late." His tall, slender form started mounting the steps.

Don Rafael crossed the stair-landing, opened the upper hallway door; then froze. Confronting him was a figure in a black slicker and a mountainous *sombrero*, and holding a gun in each hand. By the dim light that streamed into the hallway from below, the Don could see a row of white teeth beneath a spiked black mustache. The *Senor* was grinning mockingly, as always. A voice so low that it was barely audible above the noises of the storm, warned:

"Ah, Don Rafael Eltran, and so eet ees! The Laughing *Senor* wans more! Do not mak' the call, or—" He jiggled the two guns suggestively. "As I study the *hacienda* by the lightning flashes, I see that she is guard. I sleep up through the shrubbery, capture wan of the guards, and tie and gag heem; then I climb a tree and pry open a weedow. You hav mak' eet easy when you kom upstair."

DON RAFAEL'S slender form was as stiff and straight as a poker. His bony hands were clenched at his sides. It seemed that his white hair bristled. Rage filled him at that moment, rage fiery and bloodthirsty. It hurt his pride to think that he had been outwitted by his mysterious enemy.

Don Rafael Eltran was a courageous old *caballero*, even though he was mean and grasping. He filled his lungs to cry out to Felix, despite the threatening guns. But the hammers of the fancy six-shooters clicked menacingly. The *Senor's* taut grin widened, and he murmured softly:

"Nuh, nuh, Don Rafael, or you will force me to make the shoot! Turn around, march down the stairs and to the safe. These gons they weel be always at your back. You weel open the safe and make the Laughing *Senor* another payment on account."

The Don did not hesitate. His eyes were glittering triumphantly now. He would lead the Laughing *Senor* right into Felix's shotgun trap.

But at the foot of the stairs his elation vanished. The muzzles of the guns were boring his back. The soft, but deadly voice of the Laughing *Senor* was warning: "Eet ees I suppose mabbe you have the guard in the office, too. Eef so, you weel have heem kom out, for eef there es trobl, I blow you apart firs', before I make the shoot at others."

Again the Don hesitated, again rage was seething in his heart; but he was a wise man, and life to him was sweet. "All right, Felix," he called:

"Come on out, the devil has me, and I know he'll shoot if anything happens."

Slowly Felix Calcis emerged into the library. Behind the Don there was a soft, mocking laugh, and then again that purring voice: "Tal heem to lay aside the shotgun and hees peestol, then kom here and peek up the lamp."

The Don obeyed. So did Felix, sullenly. He still had his shoulder gun, but to try to use it might mean the Don's life. "You weel now lead the way into the office," purred the bandit.

But Felix did not do so. At that instant from the direction of the front door came a command in a hard voice: "Drop them guns, Laughing *Senor*, or you're a dead bandit!"

The robber jerked a glance behind. The three guards from outside had quietly slipped into the room, and were spreading to cover him from all angles with their drawn six shooters.

For one tense instant it seemed that the Laughing *Senor* would still take some desperate chance, but Felix jerked a Colt thirty-eight from a shoulder holster and jabbed it against the bandit's side. "Drop them, fellow, or I'll put a hole through you!"

The *Senor* dropped his two pearl handled guns. No longer was he grinning. His face—what could be seen of it—was rigid. The Don whirled, picked up the two ornate guns. His thin old visage was a mask of triumph once more: "Search him for other weapons, Felix."

Felix set the lamp away and searched. A heavy bladed knife was all that was found.

"Now let's see who he is," exulted the Don. He gave the black goatee a jerk. It came off, leaving exposed a blunt chin. Next, the spiked mustache. The lips were thin and set. The Don knocked off the silver spangled sombrero, and swept away the yellow silk head-covering. The hair was brown. Then he laid a hand on the mask. Unconsciously he paused, for now was to come the final denouement. The identity of the Robin Hood of the range was to become known.

CHAPTER VIII

"HANG HIM"

A FLICK of the Don's hand, and off came the mask. There stood *—Lan Donaldson!*

For an instant every one except Lan Donaldson stared transfixed, too stunned to speak or move. Lan was calmly rolling a cigarette, a quirk on his lips. Outside, the thunder rumbled, the rain and hail beat, the lightning played on wet windows. Then from the stairway came a husky exclamation:

"Lan Donaldson! *You!*"

His brown hands froze on the cigarette and his glance flew to the stair-landing. Celia Edwards was standing there, clad in negligee and slippers, her brown little hands gripping the banister. Her hair was a tumbled cloud. Her eyes glowed black in her taut, pale face.

Lan bowed: "*Si, senorita mia.* Do I fascinate you now?"

She did not answer. At that instant a pair of curtains parted and a man emerged from a dark room. It was Spence Harley. He was thrusting a gun into a holster. There was a satisfied smile on his lips.

"I thought I had your number, Donaldson. I searched your shack today, but couldn't find your *caballero* regalia."

"You should have tried the hayloft," Lan told him sardonically, going ahead with his cigarette.

"I watched your place, and followed you here tonight, but lost you for a while in the storm. As the three guards were entering through the front door, I was entering by the back. I've had you covered from between the curtains. I'd an idea you'd make some desperate play, and I was all set to plug you."

"Nice of you, Harley," murmured Lan.

Strangely to all, Don Rafael did not go into an outburst of temperament. He was icy calm, but his black eyes were glittery as he asked: "Why did you do do it, Donaldson?"

Lan's face hardened: "You likely remember the widow, Cynthia Hix—or do you keep track of your villainies? Well, she was mighty sick, and had a younker on her hands—me. My real name is Lan Donaldson Hix. You bought up a mortgage on our little ranch, and takin' advantage of mother's illness, even when she was out of her head, browbeat her into practically giving you the spread. The shock finished her. You kicked me off the place when I was thirteen, and I went away into Mexico. It was a hard pull, but I made her. I always swore I'd get even with you, and I've been doin' so on the instalment plan. At first I robbed you from the Mexico side, but finally decided it would be more convenient if I lived over here near you. But git this straight: I'm not the fella who rides with a gang of cutthroats, and murders and robs rampant. That one is only takin' advantage of the rep I've set up, to masquerade as me and ride wild."

"What have you done with all you've taken from me?"

"She's salted down, you old buzzard, where you'll never git her, no matter what you do to me."

Don Rafael's slender form trembled. His face was ashen. His eyes were burning coals. Suddenly he barked: "Tie his hands, Joe! Rouse the whole outfit, Jim! You're going to witness a hanging!"

"Yes, hang him!" agreed Felix, and his dark-gray, black-rimmed eyes were murderous.

ONE of the punchers rushed out to arouse the rest of the punchers. Another jerked back Lan's hands and tied his wrists with saddle strings.

Celia came running down the stairs: "No, no; Uncle Rafael! You can't do this terrible thing! We have no mob here! Turn him over to the law!"

"After all he has done to me? Celia, I tell you that no power on earth could keep me from having this man's blood! I don't believe there is another Laughing *Senor*—unless it's one of this man's band—just to confuse every one."

Celia pleaded, chalk-faced, eyes burning, lips trembling. She would not look at Lan.

Spence Harley put in quietly: "I think Miss Celia is right, Don Rafael; we should let the law take its course."

"Cut that, Harley!" Lan said sharply. "If you want to git yourself into the young lady's good graces, do it some other way. I know that deep down in yore heart you'd like to see me stretch a riata."

Harley subsided. His face was hard now.

Men swarmed into the room. Celia ran to Lan, flung her arms about him, sobbed out pleas for mercy. Felix flung her ruthlessly away. The Don shoved her toward the stairs and snarled at her to go back to bed. Lan was whirled roughly and thrust toward the door.

On the front porch he came suddenly face to face with Bert Stager, holding a lighted lantern under a side of his slicker. They just stared at each other coldly. The Don snatched the light and led the way to the barn.

One of the punchers had already hurried there to make preparations for a necktie party. A lantern hung on a nail. An overhead plank had been knocked away, and a rope thrown over a rafter.

The Don personally passed the noose over the cowboy's head and jerked it tight about his brown throat. The old ranchman's face was cruel: "Now for the last time, Donaldson, what have you done with all you've stolen from me? If you tell me, and give it back, I may consider turning you over to the law, instead of hanging you as you deserve."

Lan said quietly: "Everything is salted down in a little ranch in Mexico, and she's willed to a pore old broken down relative whom you likewise once robbed. As for returnin' anything—I'd see you in hell first."

"You're going to hell right now! Yank him up, men!"

"Wait a minute!" Surprisingly Bert Stager came forward. "Don Rafael, I don't believe Donaldson's the fellow who murdered the two stage hands. I do believe there's another *Senor*. I'd say, turn him over to the law."

Lan eyed the rawboned foreman queerly. "Thanks, Stager, but I don't quite git you. How come you—"

"Enough of this!" the Don ordered stridently. "Heave on that rope!"

Four husky *vaqueros* heaved. Lan felt harsh constriction at his throat; felt the blood rush to his head, felt his eyes pop. His boot soles left the floor; then things went black.

CHAPTER IX

THE SENOR LAUGHS AGAIN

"STOP that!" Although the voice was feminine, it popped like a whip. Celia Edwards had slipped into the barn, and she held her single barreled shotgun rigidly level at the hip. Her hair and her nightclothes were bedraggled from the storm.

The four men who had heaved on the line, instantly let go as their startled eyes focused on the shotgun. Lan hit the floor and fell limply. The next instant he was sitting up, shaking the daze from his brain. He thrust himself quickly to his feet.

"Celia," snarled Felix Calcis, "get out of here with that shotgun!"

"Yes get out, you damned little fool!" yapped Don Rafael, who was murder-mad over the losses he had suffered, and over Lan Donaldson's reckless defiance of his vengeance.

The hammer of the shotgun clicked. Celia's face was like marble. Her mouth was a tight, vivid streak. "Stand back, all of you! I'll shoot, so help me God!" The muzzle of the shotgun was weaving jerkily. "Take off that rope before I blast you!" she bit out at one of the men.

He sprang to obey, muttering as he lifted the noose: "She'd jest about do it! You never can tell about a womern!"

Felix sprang suddenly. The shotgun banged. Whether Celia Edwards had fired voluntarily, or Felix had caused her trigger finger to constrict as he struck the menacing barrel aside, no one in that moment knew. The blast of shot tore a *vaquero's* hat away. He let out a wild yell and dived behind some baled alfalfa. Felix closed with that fighting, screaming little wildcat

and struggled for possession of the shotgun. Don Rafael went to his aid.

In that moment of excitement Lan took a desperate chance. He hurled himself through the open door and went plunging into the storm. Behind him there were yells of: "Halt! Stop him! Catch him! Kill him!" guns crashed, but the fugitive had flung himself to one side, and so the hail of lead whistled harmlessly past.

Realizing that if he ran across the corral he probably would be recaptured or shot before he could get over the pole fence, he ducked into an empty stall. He sprang blindly to a manger, backed against one of its sharp corners, and began sawing desperately at the saddle strings which held his wrists.

The sharp corner of the manger was saw-edged, and two strands of Lan's bonds quickly parted. It was easy, then, to tear his hands free of the others.

Through a wide crack in the wall of the stall, he saw Celia standing in the barn doorway. She was like a bedraggled ghost. Her lips trembled, and she prayed half sobbingly: "*Madre de Dios,* let him get away!" It was the first time he had ever heard her use Spanish.

OUT in the snarling storm the men were running excitedly, searching for him by the lightning flashes. Celia left the open door and moved along the aisle between the two stalls. Silently Lan kept even with her. The next moment they stood side by side just beyond the streaming eaves.

She gasped as she became aware of his near presence. He seized one of her drenched arms; said swiftly, earnestly: "Thanks, Celia dear! Everything I told tonight is true, so help me God! Good-bye! I love you!"

He swept her wet, bedraggled form into his arms, crushed her tight, kissed cold, damp lips; then went springing away into the darkness.

He had left his mount concealed in a thicket a hundred yards away, and now he made for it. A moment later a wild, mocking laugh coming faintly out of the storm, brought the search for the escaped prisoner to an abrupt stop. The Robin Hood of the range had won again.

When he realized that Lan Donaldson Hix had definitely escaped, that it would be laughable folly to ride after him that stormy night, Don Rafael Eltran was like an insane man. He went into one of his wildest rages, cursing, threatening every one; generally behaving so vehemently that the punchers all stole away into the wet darkness. The Don even went up to the house to curse Celia, his only love besides his money; but he found her door locked and she would not open it, despite all his physical and verbal demands. With the threat that he would have it out with her in the morning, he went stamping downstairs.

Felix was in the front room. Spence Harley had headed for home, preferring to talk to the old eagle when he was in a sane mood.

"We've got to get that fellow! We've got to get him, I tell you!" the Don kept saying.

"I got him once, or my plan did," Felix reminded.

"What good does it do to get him if we let him get away? Celia is a chicken hearted little fool! If it hadn't been for her—"

"Chicken hearted my eye. She's crazy about that fellow."

"She was, I know, but not now. She couldn't be, after she knows he's the Laughing *Senor.* No, no, she couldn't

be!" There was hurt in the old man's voice.

Now that some of the fire within the volcanic breast had died, Felix said very gently: "How about my thousand dollars?"

Don Rafael wheeled. The volcano was erupting again. "What?" he fairly screamed. "You have the impudence to stand there and tell me you hope to collect a reward off me?"

Felix Calcis' peculiar gray eyes went slaty: "It's not my fault he got away. You said you'd pay if my trap worked. It did, so—where's the money?"

There was hard demand in his voice—and Felix Calcis could be a dangerous man.

"Me pay a reward for a bandit who's still riding wild, and ready to rob me again?" He let out a yapping laugh that ended suddenly with a snapping of bony jaws.

"Why you insolent young puppy! To try to extort money from me in such a manner! And after all I've done for you! You were practically riding grubline, and I gave you a job as assistant manager at good wages! I even treated you as a blood relative, though in truth you're not! A thousand dollars reward for an escaped bandit! Why, damn you, Felix—"

"You cussed old skinflint!" exploded Felix Calcis, suddenly showing the real tiger in his nature. That tiger usually slept and purred, but right now it was snarling.

"What's that? What's that?" The eagle was screaming again.

One hot word led to another. Felix cursed the Don viciously. Suddenly beside himself with rage, Don Rafael flashed the gun which he still carried in his shoulder and fired. The bullet ripped a bloody gash across the other man's neck.

FELIX CALCIS also had a gun in a shoulder holster. He was nervy, and lightning with his hardware, yet he did not try to draw. Standing with his hands clenched he said in a voice that was poisonously calm: "You will pay plenty for that, you old devil!"

"Get out! I never want to see you again, you ungrateful saddle tramp!"

"Certainly I'll go," agreed Felix, the deadliness still in his even voice. "But remember, you'll pay, and pay plenty."

He turned and went bowlegging for the door.

CHAPTER X

KIDNAPED

LAN DONALDSON HIX realized very well that he must not immediately return to his little ranch adjoining the big Crescent Star Arrow spread. Men were sure to wait there to recapture or kill him. Now that he was known to be one of the Laughing *Senores*, and that the Don was offering a thousand dollars for his capture, he would not be quite safe anywhere in the vicinity for that matter.

And so that stormy night he rode straight for the bigger and better ranch in Mexico, which he had built up with his "takings" from Don Rafael Eltran. This ranch he owned under another name. He was leaving only leased range, anyway. As for his few scrub cattle back there, he could rustle his own stock—if the crafty, crooked Don did not beat him to it. If the old scoundrel did, well, Lan would "charge" him with them, and collect in full in due time.

The only thing that really hurt, was the leaving of Celia Edwards. His heart was like a chunk of lead as he thought of it. He wondered what she

thought of him now that she knew him to be the Laughing *Senor*. To be sure she had come to his rescue, but perhaps she would have done the same for any man. He might as well try to forget Celia Edwards. She could never be his—just as he had realized all along. He had thought that sooner or later he would be found out.

But after a week on his Mexico ranch, his old daring spirit returned. He hated to think of letting the crafty old Don win even a single point. He wanted to get his small herd of scrub cattle across the line. As for the shack and its bachelor equipment, they were inconsequential.

On this very same day, Celia Edwards and Don Rafael Eltran were alone, save for Manuelita and Pedro. Bert Stager had ridden over to see Spence Harley about a prospective horse-trade: his palomino and some "to-boot," for Harley's splendid dappled gray. It was Sunday, and the rest of the crew had gone to a rodeo in town.

Don Rafael had not "had it out" with Celia as he had threatened. Her chilling reserve toward him had stopped any outburst that might have risen to his tongue, and had thrown him into a gloomy, silent mood. As the days had passed, she had made him understand that she believed every word Lan had said. She did not veil her contempt for any one who would cheat a frail widow and send her to her grave. And so day by day the Don's spirit had sunk lower. Apparently he was beginning to see for the first time, what an old villain he had been all his life.

It was about mid-morning. The Don was in the library reading. Celia was just coming down the stairs, all ready for a ride. Manuelita and Pedro were in the kitchen. There was a trampling of hoofs outside. "Yo-ho, *Senor!*" a voice hailed.

Celia stopped on the stairs. She and the Don exchanged glances, then Don Rafael got up and went to a window. "Two strange Mexicans."

Again came a voice: "Don Rafael Eltran! *Gracias, p r o n t o!*" The straight-backed old *caballero* went to the mantel, picked up a six-gun, and thrust it into his shoulder holster; then he started for the door. "Do be careful!" breathed Celia.

She hurried down the stairs. Manuelita and Pedro came in from the kitchen. They all peeped. Since the recent happenings, uneasiness was easily aroused in that household.

The Don opened the door and stepped out, but he stood close to the frame, prepared to spring back and slam the door should his sharp eyes catch any hostile move. "Good morning, cowboys," he said in Spanish. "What is it you want?"

One of them told that he and his *compadre* had run across half a dozen Crescent Star Arrow cows that had been shot to death, over in a canyon five miles north of the *hacienda*.

The Don was suspicious, and sharply questioned them. Suddenly he leaped back and whirled. He had heard light footsteps in the back part of the house.

Celia and the two old servants wheeled, too. One of Celia's gloved fists flew to her mouth to stifle a cry. Manuelita breathed a frightened: *"Dios, mio!"*

WHILE attention was centered upon the two *vaqueros* out front, five men had slipped in by the back way and now were rushing into the room, scattering with the lithe, quick stealth of marauding cats as they came. Each held a drawn gun.

One was Mexican, one a Yaqui, the other three renegade Americans.

"What does this mean?" the Don demanded sharply, haughtily.

A lanky fellow with reddish beard, a flat nose, and slitted coyote eyes grinned and said: "The Laughing *Senor* wants to talk with you an' the filly. Take 'em boys."

Celia wheeled and ran for the stairs, but the Mexican and the Yaqui went bounding after her. The Don recklessly jerked out his shoulder gun and fired. The Yaqui went over and hit the floor hard, blood rushing from a hole in his dirty headband.

In a flash the Don turned his gun toward the Mexican who was on the stairs. He fired, but his bullet hit the stairpost. The next instant two of the renegades were upon him: the tall, lanky one, and a squat, bearded fellow with Teutonic features. They bore him to the floor, but as he went down he managed to get his gun muzzle against the breast of the Teuton. He pulled the trigger, felt the body tense and quiver — then a pistol butt smashed the consciousness out of him.

The two Mexicans who had been out front came rushing in. The fellow who had gone bounding after Celia, caught her at the head of the stairs.

The Mexican on the stairs pinioned Celia's arms and bore her down, while every limb and muscle of her strong little body fought furiously.

The kidnapers quickly had their way. The hands of both captives were bound. A bucket of water in the face revived the Don. He was hauled to his feet.

"Hurry! Let's get the hell away from here!" ordered the lanky renegade. "Somebody on the range might've heard them shots! Never mind Dutch an' the Yak. You can bet they're finished."

The captives were bound on the horses of the two bandits who had been bowled over in the house. The party left the *rancho* at a high lope.

CHAPTER XI

STALKING THE KIDNAPERS

AS he rode his long, curving course through the Mexican hills, Lan Donaldson Hix stopped on eminences now and then to scan the terrain through his spyglasses. Don Rafael Eltran's reward offer might have men on the lookout for him, even on this side of the river.

On one of these inspections of the country he glimpsed a band of riders, just dropping down into a coulee. Before he could focus his glasses upon them they were gone. He swung a little wider and rode on.

He had traveled about half a mile more, when he jerked his blue, speckled mustang to a stop. Somewhere a rifle had spoken. For a moment he listened, as alert as a startled wolf, and then: *Crack!* Once more a rifle shot, coming out of the distance. This time he placed the sound. It was in the general direction of the coulee where he had seen the band of riders.

Lan remained still for another moment; then as a third shot came drifting to him he muttered to himself, swung his mount again, and set off at a run in the direction from which the shots had come. Bandit gangs often roved the hills. Perhaps some person was in distress.

The shots kept coming, and they guided him to the rim of a rocky, bowl-like depression. He saw at a glance that some one was at bay down there. A saddled horse stood at the edge of

a field of boulders. Four others were grouped at the forks of two brush lined arroyos. Occasional puffs of smoke were coming from amidst the boulders, and he could see a crouched form down there. Four men, carrying rifles and riatas, were skulking along the slopes in an encircling movement.

He quickly focused his glasses upon the person at bay. "A woman!" he muttered. In swift succession he studied the four men. Three of them were Mexicans, the other a small *Gringo.*

Lan's wide mouth closed grimly. A woman in distress! That was enough to send him into action.

He hit the ground with his rifle in his hands, and ran down to an outcrop of rock. He sat down behind it, laid his rifle across its rim, and waited. A man, darting from one streak of bushes to another, caught his eye. His cheek went quickly to the carbine stock and the sharp report of his 32-20 Marlin racked among the rimrocks.

The Mexican at whom he had fired, stopped abruptly; then flung himself behind a nearby rock. Lan saw the girl turn and look in his direction. He laughed shortly: "I bet there are several surprised people down there."

Downhill to his right a Winchester spoke. He saw a puff of smoke and the peak of a Mexican *sombrero.* He shifted the carbine butt to his left shoulder and fired from that side. He saw rockdust fly. The *sombrero* ducked quickly out of sight. Again he chuckled.

The girl was shooting again, now, and more rapidly. There was confidence in her firing.

A leaden hornet bit a sliver from the top of Lan's outcrop. It flew into his face and cut a small gash. He swore and looked again across the bowl. The Mexican who had fired the shot was running for a better place of shelter. Once more Lan's carbine spoke. The Mexican threw away his rifle, plunged sidewise, and went sliding accompanied by gravel and dirt. The body stopped there on the hillside and lay still, spread-eagled.

A bullet from well up on his own slope raked the cowboy's shoulders lightly. "Whew! That was close!" He just glimpsed a Stetson dropping out of sight. The Renegade *Gringo* was more careful than his Mexican allies. *Crack!* Lan's hat jumped askew. He hurriedly shifted position.

One of the girl's bullets brought a long howl of pain from the Mexican who had fired that last shot at Lan. Lan saw him going humping for the horses, holding his rifle in his left hand, his right arm dangling. He could have downed the fellow easily, but refrained from doing so. Instead, he took a snapshot at another flitting form, and knew by the way it flinched, that he had scored a slight hit. This man, too, now made for the horses. The slender little renegade rat had shrewdly been keeping out of sight while working his way steadily toward Lan, but now finding himself deserted by his two comrades, he too gave up the fight.

Lan and the girl might have dropped all three of the men before they could mount and get away, but they held their fire. Soon the trio was kiting it into the hills.

LAN got up and returned to his horse. With his glasses Lan watched the three riders for a while, to make certain that they did not circle back; then he mounted his Bluey horse and rode down the slope. He got the shock of his life when he rode up to the young woman and discovered her to be Celia Edwards.

"Lan!" she cried.

"Ceily! What in the world does this mean?"

She told what had happened at the ranch. "The kidnapers tied my wrists together; then to the saddle horn. My hands are small, and so as we rode along I finally managed to slip them through the coils. One of the men was leading my mount by the bridle reins. I waited until we were traveling single file through some brush; then I slapped my mount on one cheek and drove with my spurs. The horse jerked free. I grabbed up the reins and rode for it. Four of the men came after me, yelling and cursing. I could hear Uncle Rafael shout encouragement, and I spurred on. Four of them finally cornered me. The other went on with Uncle Rafael. I was using the rifle which they'd carelessly left on my mount, when you took a hand."

Lan told how he had chanced to be in the vicinity; then: "The other Laughing *Senor*, huh?" A hard glint came into his eyes, a bitter twist to his thin lips. "I reckon now you and yore uncle believe what I told that night."

"I believed you all the time, Lan, and I didn't blame you for what you'd done. Uncle Rafael has admitted by his actions lately that what you said about his robbing your widowed mother was true. I think for once he's come to see what an old villain he is."

He had dismounted. They both had stood their rifles against a boulder. He took her hands. They lay firm and cool within his own. Brown eyes met lustrous darker ones in deep understanding. "Ceily!" he said in a husky, thrumming voice. "I lo—, that is, it was nice of you to believe in me."

She smiled swiftly. "Why didn't you say what you were going to, Lan? You told me that night, you know. And here's your kiss back—with interest." She seized him—tiptoed, kissed him squarely on the lips twice in quick succession.

"Ceily!" He reached for her, but she put his eager hands away. "And now," she said briskly, determinedly, "We must rescue Uncle Rafael."

"You must ride back home. I'll follow the trail and see what I can do."

"I'll go with you," she insisted. They argued, finally he conceded:

"All right, but soon as we locate the holeup place you're ridin' for help, while I keep an eye on the stronghold."

"Let's get going," she said without agreeing.

NOW and then the three gunmen paused to scan the backtrail; but Lan and Celia were traveling parallel with them. After about an hour they seemingly became convinced that there was no pursuit, and so they changed direction and hit straight for the wildest part of the hills.

The sun went down. Darkness came rapidly. In the gloom and the roughs the cowboy and the girl lost the "shadow." They rode on at random for a while. Soon they began to feel despair, for even with daylight they would never be able to follow tracks in that rough country. Then from a rim they saw the glow of a campfire, down in a deep, rugged coulee.

"Ah!" breathed Lan. "The hangout! You hide here and wait. I'll slip down and reconnoiter."

"I'll go with you. It'll be safer than staying here alone." And so they hid their horses, took their rifles; then hand in hand stole down the slope and toward the gleaming campfire.

They had gone but a little way, before Lan thrust Celia behind a bushy scrub cedar and pulled her down be-

side him. He had seen two riders emerging from the gloom.

There was a clinking of rocks. The horsemen were moving at a walk. They passed within ten paces of the hiding pair, went on up the slope, and disappeared over the rim. Lan and Celia stood up and looked wonderingly into each other's faces. They both had recognized the pair as Spence Harley and Bert Stager.

"Huh!" Lan grunted finally. "What do you make of that?" Celia wagged her head wonderingly. Lan asked: "Do you reckon one of them gents could be the *Senor* who kills and kidnaps?"

"I wonder!"

But there was no time to stand there and conjecture. Again he took one of her firm, cool hands, and they went cautiously on down the slope. They reached the canyon floor, worked their way through a growth of scrub cedars, and stood within fifty yards of the campfire. They could see men about it —some ten to fifteen in number. Stretched out full length, sitting crosslegged on the ground, squatted on spurred heels they ringed the fire; smoking cigarettes, laughing hoarsely, and conversing in gruff tones. The flickering fireglow played vaguely upon their bearded faces.

Twenty yards to the east of the campfire was a long, crude bunkhouse; built of adobe, rocks, sod and poles. "They've likely got the prisoner there," reasoned Lan. "You wait—"

"I'm going with you. I wouldn't be alone now for anything." He felt like kicking himself for not having sent her home in the beginning, but it was too late to regret. He guessed it would be as safe or safer for her to go with him, as to hide and wait alone.

They circled and came up in rear of the crude building. There were no windows in back, only loopholes; and so they moved around to an end. Standing close together, his right arm about her slim waist, they peeped through a dingy window.

They saw a tousled, unkempt place —bedding, riding equipment, an arsenal. A smutty lantern stood on a keghead. There was no one inside.

"I wonder," Lan whispered; then stiffened. Behind him a gruff voice had ordered: "Freeze! or we'll drill you both!"

CHAPTER XII

IN CRUEL HANDS

LAN felt a rifle barrel jab his back. He knew by the way Celia flinched that she had felt the rigid touch of another. He dared not move, for if he did it probably would mean instant death for both of them. "Drop the rifles," the gruff voice commanded. They obeyed. Lan felt his six-gun leave its holster. He was patted for other weapons. "All right, turn around, with yore hands up."

Once more they silently obeyed. They saw two men. One was the lanky, coyote-eyed fellow who had led the kidnap gang. The other was the slim little killer with the fish eyes and the squirrel teeth. He was grinning now, and his thin face was covered with mean wrinkles. The lanky one said:

"Me an' Killer Kid here sorter had an idee you might manage to foller us, so we been on the lookout. The Laughing *Senor* will be right glad you made it. Start marchin'. We'll direct you, an' I reckon it ain't needful for me to tell you that if either of you make a break it's death for both."

They were marched to a one-roomed shack, guarded by a slowly pacing Mexican who wore a misshapen wreck of an old *sombrero*. They were thrust

inside. Instantly they saw Don Rafael Eltran, crouched in a corner, hands tied behind him and bound to his ankles. The look of pain on his thin old face told that he was suffering from the bonds which had been on his wrists so long. His eyes brightened; then saddened at sight of Celia.

"Uncle!" she cried, and started impulsively toward him, but a harsh voice stopped her short: "Hold it! You can blubber later. Tie 'em both, Killer Kid, whilst me an' Tomaso stand guard."

They were made to sit upon the dirt floor, and were quickly tied in the same manner as the Don. The lanky man then said: "Better set right here in the doorway an' keep an eye on 'em constant, Tomaso, so they don't git to one another an' rid themselves of their bonds."

The Mexican grinned, nodded, sat down in the doorway with his rifle across his lap and a *cigarillo* between his teeth. The other two bandits stepped over the fellow's outstretched legs and went out.

Don Rafael looked curiously at Lan and asked: "What does this mean, Donaldson, your being a prisoner, too?"

Celia put in quickly: "It means that he told the truth that night." And she related all that had happened since her escape.

"Bert Stager and Harley, eh?" mused the Don, after Celia had told about the two riders who had come out of the canyon. "Humph! I wonder if one of them is the other Laughing *Senor?*"

Lan inquired: "Then you haven't seen the *Senor* yet?"

"No; I've an idea he was waiting until he could recapture Celia. He rushed two men to the *Rancho*—just in case she escaped the four who'd ridden after her."

Lan looked at the Mexican who sat in the doorway: "How about it, *hombre?* Who's this Laughing *Senor* fella?"

The bandit grinned lazily, shrugged, gestured indolently; said nothing. Lan knew it would be useless to press him.

AT this instant there was a brisk tramping outside, and the lanky man returned: "The *Senor* says he's right glad you called, an' that he will see you now." Without more ado he freed their ankles, but left their wrists bound. Tomaso had got up and stood aside. "All right, march," ordered the stringy man. "I'll direct you again. Trail along, Tomaso. If one of 'em makes a break, don't hesitate to shoot."

This time they were taken to a rather large shack, which stood within a close ring of trees. Again there was a guard outside. Silently they filed through the door, walked to the middle of a rather large room, and stopped. Before them was masked Laughing *Senor* Number Two.

He said softly: "Ah, my frands! And so your honor me!" He bowed mockingly without getting up.

Lan studied him intently, but could make nothing of the shadowed, masked features. There had been plenty of time for Stager and Harley to get back. Was this grinning *Senor* one of those two?

"Who are you?" the Don rapped out.

The fellow laughed softly. "*Ah, Senor,* a *caballero* ees not so inqueesitive."

"Why did you want us here?"

"You have the moch money, Don Rafael Eltran. Me, I am the ver' poor

wan. You will write me the checks on the three banks where you have the *dinero*, the total, she will be feefty tousan dollar. Eef I cash them, you and the pretty *senorita* go free. Eef the bank do not cash, then I set you alone free so you can go bring the *dinero*. In the meantime, I change hideeng places, and hold the *senorita*. You will pay to a messenger. You play the treek, and the *senorita* she soffer."

THE Don's thin face had gone very pale: "I haven't that much money. I've secretly bought a piece of range in another county, and the deal cleaned out my bank accounts."

The grin vanished. The masked man leaned forward and hit the table so hard that the glass and the bottle jiggled: "You lie! You have the moch money! Eef you do not geeve—" He leaned back in his chair, twirled a spike of his mustache, grinned again, said in the insidious purring tone: "I should ver' moch like to have these leetle wan to stay weeth me always. Perhaps she ees worth the feefty tousan."

Don Rafael cursed him in Spanish. Lan said nothing, but ridges of muscle were playing on his square jaws, and he was secretly straining at his bonds. He looked at Celia. At that instant the *Senor's* attention was fixed upon the irate Don, who was still bemeaning him vehemently. The girl caught Lan's eye and sent a meaning glance to her waist. His gaze dropped. At first he was puzzled, then he understood. A thrill of elation shot through him. The head of a silver-handled stiletto protruded slightly above her broad Spanish sash. That was one weapon which Killer Kid had missed in his swift search of her. Lan masked his feelings and looked again at the insidious *Senor*. The fellow was saying:

"I geeve you wan hour, Don Rafael, to think eet over. Eef still you do not write the checks, then I weesh to see the pretty wan alone—for the firs' time, I mean." Again his eyes ravished Celia's form.

"You beast!" hoarsed the Don. "I'll kill you for this!"

The other laughed. "Eet is I who keel. Eef by morning you steel do not write, then I try the torture. As for these wan," he looked at Lan: "Eef I get the *dinero*, I do not care eef he get the girl. Otherwise—" He jerked a finger across his throat. "So pretty *Senorita*, perhaps eet ees well you reason weeth your stubborn, money-loving onkle.

"Enough!" He waved a hand, then reached again for the wine bottle. "All right, le's go," harshed the lanky renegade guard.

The prisoners were started marching back for the prison shack. Don Rafael was gritting his teeth and muttering under his breath. Lan was walking just ahead of Celia. He pretended to stumble, but caught himself up quickly and she bumped into him. In that instant his hands found and jerked free the silver-handled stiletto.

He managed to get the blade upward under his bound wrists. Once his heart jumped, for he thought that he had lost hold of the handle. Now, though, with fierce elation drumming in his brain, he began sawing gently at his bonds as he walked along. The moon was not up yet; the night was very dark, and so the two guards did not notice what he was doing.

They were right at the shack before the last thong parted. He man-

aged to get behind, and let the other two prisoners go in ahead of him. As Lan crossed the dimly lighted threshold, the lanky man prodded him in the back and growled: "Come on, come on! What you laggin' fer?"

Quick as a flash Lan wheeled. His freed left hand knocked the rifle barrel aside. His right sent the sliver of steel driving for the fellow's skinny neck. In such emergencies one can not wisely show pity.

CHAPTER XIII

A WILD BATTLE

HE felt the keen blade sink through hard flesh and grate against bone. Instantly the rifle fell from lax hands and the long legs buckled. There was a look of startled horror frozen on the outlaw's face. Blood was gushing along the stiletto.

Lan's right hand snatched the man's six-gun while the lanky body was crumpling. Tomaso had jerked to a stop with a surprised: "Ugh!" His rifle, which had been held somewhat carelessly, jumped to cover Lan, but before its muzzle could be brought to bear the crouched cowboy fired.

Flame spurted from the Winchester, and a bullet tore splinters from an edge of the doorfacing. Lan's forty-five slug had struck the fellow in the forehead. He went backward as if kicked in the face by a mule.

Lan stabbed the Colt into his holster, stooped, jerked the bloody stiletto from Slim's neck. The two shots racked wildly within the rock-ribbed coulee. The figures about the campfire were leaping into action. Excited shouts filled the night.

Lan wheeled and slashed Celia's bonds with a single quick rake of the blade. She was praying huskily, fervently. The Don was urging speed. Lan thrust the bloody stiletto into the girl's hands. She shuddered at the sticky touch of it. He rapped out at her. "Stop that! It's life or death! Slash your uncle's bonds!"

Already he was back at the nearest sprawled form, taking weapons and ammunition and tossing them into the cabin. "Grab them guns and belts! Then run for it!" He appropriated the weapons and cartridges of the Mexican, too.

When he jerked himself erect he saw that it was too late for a dash into the darkness. The gun-wise outlaws had quickly spread a dragnet to catch or kill the prisoners, should they attempt flight.

"Too late!" the cowboy snapped, as he sprang back and slammed the door. "Douse that light!"

Don Rafael, who now was free, sprang to obey. Lan put the heavy door-bar into place; then flung himself to one of the four windows—there was one on each side. He could hear the strident voice of the mysterious *Senor*, yelling orders to the rushing gang.

As his first glance went through the window, Lan saw flashes of gunfire. A window pane beside his right cheek was dashed out, and bullets whacked wickedly against the wall beyond. He rammed his captured rifle through the jagged hole and fired pointblank at one of the rushing forms. It went down like a wet sack.

Behind him and to his right and to his left, sounded other shots. He knew that Don Rafael and Celia had joined in the battle.

"Celia, stop that and get down!" yelled Lan.

"Yes!" agreed the Don. "You'll be killed!" But she paid no heed. They

could not take time to use physical force to make her obey, for the outlaws were so close and coming on so fast that it was necessary for the two men to lay down rapid fire.

For just a few seconds the night shuddered to the crashing of firearms; the whip, buzz, and scream of flying lead; the savage flashing of gun-lightning.

The rush was stopped by the withering rapid fire from within the shack. The attackers began to scurry for places of shelter, from which they might lay down a more deliberate fire. The *Senor* was still shouting orders in Spanish. Lan heard him say: "Build a godevil! We'll burn the damned shack!"

But the command was never executed. At that instant mysterious fires began to break out in the thick brush on the south side of camp. Lan barked the information to his friends.

"There's more on this side!" called Celia.

"And over here, too," from the Don.

Abruptly the firing ceased. There was excited shouting back and forth among the outlaws.

QUICKLY the camp was ringed with fire that lighted the scene vaguely. There was no danger to the crude buildings, for they stood in a small clearing. Smoke rolled heavenward through the still air. Fireglow set weird shadows to dancing in the night. And then out in the darkness sounded a shot. A chorus of yells went up; then came a drumming of many hoofs. Horsemen were charging the camp from all sides, shooting and whooping as they rode.

Pandemonium broke out among the outlaws. Lan could see against the firelight, eerie human shadows, running wildly for places of concealment or escape. One of them he recognized as the Killer Kid. He took a bead on it and fired. The slender form pitched forward and hit the ground hard. The squirrel-toothed little killer's murder career was ended.

Lan stiffened and muttered an exclamation. Out near the center of the outlaw camp was a cellar—a place where stores were kept, no doubt. He had seen a man dart to it, jerk open the door, and duck down the rectangular opening. The door slammed into place. The mysterious *Senor*, seeing that he could not gun his way through and into the protecting darkness, had cunningly gone into hiding.

Riders broke through the circle of fire and shot down outlaws right and left. The bandits now were fighting desperately as they scurried here and there. Guns flashed everywhere. Their blended reports pounded the night. The fireglow became stronger and more eerie. It was an awful scene.

The battle was quickly over. Riders were swarming all over the place. Several forms lay sprawled on the ground. Those outlaws who had not been gunned to death, now had their hands high and yelling for mercy.

"My boys, and a posse from town!" the Don spoke elatedly. "Thank God!" He rushed out to greet them. Lan followed him, calling back to Celia as he did so: "You better stay here for a while."

Riders swarmed around Lan and Don Rafael. They threw down on Lan with their sixes, but the Don quickly said: "He's all right."

A man with a star on his breast came forward—Sheriff Bill Nixon! He explained: "Old Manuelita woke up and found that the Yaqui who was

shot in the ranch house was only creased. She tied him; then rode to Harley's place to report to him and Stager. They got us boys together; then we forced that Yak to lead us here, givin' him his liberty in return. Harley and Stager come down and scouted the place; then come back and we planned the attack."

"It was good work," complimented the Don. "But how about that Laughing *Senor* fellow? Did you get him?"

"No, they didn't," Lan put in grimly. "He ducked into that cellar over there. I'll get him." He dropped the rifle, drew the six-gun at his right thigh, and ran. The others trooped after him.

He flung back the cellar door, leaped aside as he did so. "All right, fella," he called, "come out of there, and come with yore hands up."

Silence. He called again: "Oh, I saw you run down there like a scared rat. Come on out."

This time a voice came back, and it dripped with venom: "Come and get me—" the fierce invitation ended in a string of lurid profanity.

Lan asked one of the riders to dismount. Wonderingly the waddy did so. Lan quickly removed the saddle. Holding it, he stationed himself in front of the yawning cellar doorway, but back from it.

"Wait!" called the sheriff. "A bunch of us will rush him! You go down alone you'll be—"

But shielding himself as much as possible with the saddle, Lan already was rushing.

As he hit the steps a gun thundered. He felt the jarring impact of a bullet against the saddle. He swore and lunged on. Again the gun roared. This time the slug flew high, for Lan had stumbled and was tumbling down the remaining steps.

As he hit the dirt floor he let go the saddle and whipped his own Colt free. A third time the *Senor's* weapon boomed. Lan was just picking himself up. It was pitch-dark there in the cellar, and the gush of flame was vivid in the gloom.

He felt a blow on his left shoulder. It hurled him back. Lying propped on one elbow he fired at the spot where the flame had shown. He heard a body thud to the dirt floor. Jerking himself to a sitting position he quickly emptied his gun at the place in the blackness from which that sound had come. There was no answering fire. He got up.

Men came pouring into the cellar. Several struck matches. Sprawled on the floor was the man in fancy *caballero* costume and black domino.

TWO men picked up the body, bore it up the steps, and to the nearby campfire. The Don knelt and ripped away false mustache, goatee, and the mask. Gasps came from the closely packed group. Every one stared.

Celia Edwards had pushed her way through the crowd, and it was her shocked voice which broke the silence:

"Felix Calcis!"

Lan went to her and put his good arm about her.

"Felix Calcis!" repeated the Don. "He swore I'd pay plenty. The banks would have cashed my checks for him, too, seeing that he was my assistant manager, and a near relative. But I believe that after he got the money he would have killed Lan and me, and kept Celia."

"Yeah," one of the captives was explaining. "He's been the leader of this gang for a long time. When he wanted a job done an' couldn't get

away to lead the outfit himself, he jest loaned them fancy duds to any of us they'd fit. He took advantage of the real Laughin' *Senor's* rep to keep suspicion from hisself."

"And I had an idea the other *Senor* was either Stager or Harley," said Lan.

"Stager was an ex-outlaw," a voice said calmly. "That was why he'd never talk about his past. He paid his debt to the law tonight. He was killed."

Lan turned, and found himself looking at Spence Harley. "And just what're you, Harley? Not a cattle buyer, I'm right shore."

The other smiled, touched his blond mustache: "I'm a range detective, sent to catch the Laughing *Senor*."

"The Laughing *Senor* is dead," the Don said stiffly, as he got to his feet. "As for Lan, here—we were all mistaken about him. He's a fine young fellow, and is going to marry my niece."

He looked at the blushing couple, and smiled, such a smile as never had been seen on his sharp features before—a wistful, kindly smile. Then gently he said: "Does that make up for the past, Lan?"

"It does," Lan agreed, "but—" He turned to Celia. "Does what he says suit you, honey?"

Her cheeks were rosy, but her smile was rare and her eyes glowing: "It certainly does, my fascinating Robin Hood. You see, I can have both you and him combined into one now."

Despite the grinning, watching crowd, Lan stooped to kiss her. Suddenly she noticed the blood on his left shoulder: "Oh! You're wounded! Let me—"

"It can wait. This here is more important." And he planted a lingering kiss upon her yielding lips.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., REQUIRED BY THE ACTS OF CONGRESS OF AUGUST 24, 1912, AND MARCH 3, 1933

Of Wild West Stories and Complete Novel Magazine, published monthly at Springfield, Massachusetts, for October 1, 1935

State of New York }
County of New York } ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared Lee Ellmaker, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the Business Manager of the Wild West Stories and Complete Novel Magazine, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, as amended by the Act of March 3, 1933, embodied in section 537, Postal Laws and Regulations, printed on the reverse of this form, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: Publisher, Teck Publications, Inc., 461 Eighth Ave., New York, N. Y.; Editor, Frederick Gardener, 461 Eighth Ave., New York, N. Y.; Managing Editor, None; Business Manager, Lee Ellmaker, 461 Eighth Ave., New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: (If owned by a corporation, its name and address must be stated and also immediately thereunder the names and addresses of stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock. If not owned by a corporation, the names and addresses of the individual owners must be given. If owned by a firm, company, or other unincorporated concern, its name and address, as well as those of each individual member, must be given.) Lee Ellmaker, 461 Eighth Ave., New York, N. Y.; Teck Publications, Inc., 461 Eighth Ave., New York, N. Y.

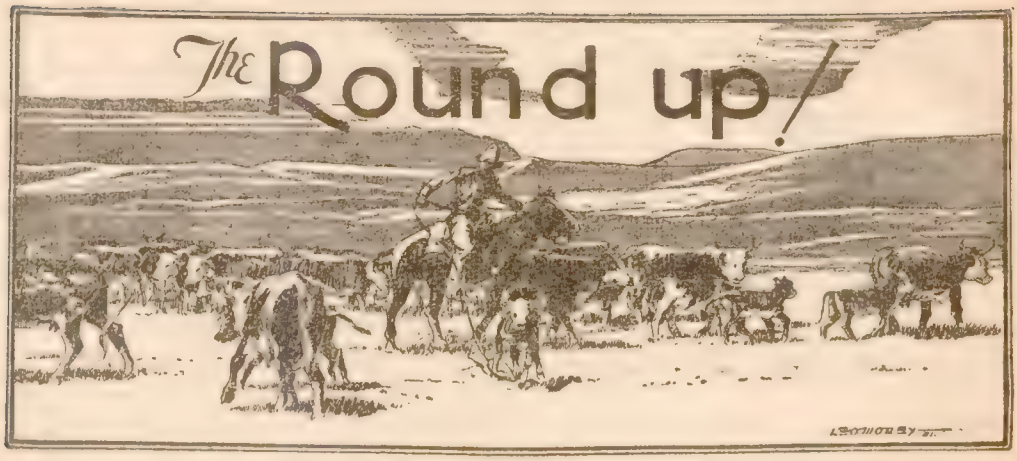
3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: (If there are none, so state.) None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

5. That the average number of copies of each issue of this publication sold or distributed, through the mails or otherwise, to paid subscribers during the twelve months preceding the date shown above is (This information is required from daily publications only).

LEE ELLMAKER, Business Manager

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 25th day of September, 1935.
EDYTHE E. TOMPKINS,
Notary Public, Bronx County Clerk's No. 62, Register's No. 66-T-36
New York County Clerk's No. 390, Register's No. 6-T-267
Commission Expires March 30, 1936.



A DEPARTMENT FOR DISCUSSION

"Wild West Stories and Complete Novel Magazine" feels that it is for the best interests of all to provide a place in which readers and writers can get together.

You are invited to write as freely as you like to The Round-up. Criticisms and commendations are particularly desired. If you write about things you wish kept confidential, be sure to make that clear. Otherwise we shall feel at liberty to print in this department anything you write.

Readers desiring Pen Pals must give a name and address to which Pals may send letters direct. We will not undertake to act as medium in such correspondence further than to publish letters requesting Pen Pals and these only as soon after receipt as is convenient. We suggest you write to those asking for letters and save time and perhaps disappointments.

Tell us what you think of the magazine and its stories. Here is "open range" for readers, authors, editors. Address all communications, The Round-up, c/o "Wild West Stories and Complete Novel Magazine," 461 Eighth Avenue, New York City.

By "COTEAU" GENE, FOREMAN

HOH KOLA: Like I told yo' last month, this durned modernized rustlin' is gittin' wuss 'n wuss. It's hittin' closter 'n closter t' th' ol' Flyin' Hoss-shoe every day. Th' only thing as is a holdin' th' rustlers back is th' distance we be from market. Back in Iowa it's plumb BAD. I seen by th' papers as a ol' friend down thar got nicked fer twenty head o' prime stuff.

It useta be tough enough when we hadda try to run down th' hoss-back rustlers, us a using hosses too. T' run 'em down now, a feller jes' about needs a airplane. They uses fast trucks. Seems some spotter drives along a slab road or a good side road in a fast car and spots nice bunches o' cows as is kept in a pasture overnights. Then he goes on an' maps out git-away trails, usually good side roads as ain't apt t' be watched closet. He makes a map o' th' *prospect,* hands it to the captain o' a truck-crew, and th' crews drives a truck out, at night, cuts a hole in th' fence, back up th' truck t' th' hole, leaves down a chute, and eases th' critters up inta th' big truck, an' AWAW THEY GO, *a mile a minute* er better.

If th' prospect is closet enough t' their market, they gits in afore day light and THET'S THET! Dawgonit, we've gotta git back t' burnin' brands agin'! I never did like this durned fence idear an' never will! Howesomever, iff'n them big town rustlers is got it fixed with th' butchers it'll be plenty hard t' trace th' cattle even if they be branded proper.

Out yere, them coots will find it ain't quite such a soft snap iff we is wide awake an' watchin' out. Th' pas-

Startling Facts for Men!

Inquire About Our New Improved Invention The "PROSAGER" and How Well It Serves Those Who Are Bothered by Getting Up Nights—And Also How Well It Serves Those with Other Weaknesses and Ailments Caused by a Faulty Prostate Gland.

PROSTATIC AILMENTS

Nervous Debility, Frequent Night Rising, Leg Pains, Lame Back, Lumbago, Lost Vigor, Kidney and Bladder Trouble, Chronic Constipation, Despondency, Restlessness at night are only some of the ailments differing in individuals, that can often be ascribed to lesion of the Prostate Gland.

MANY DOCTORS ENDORSE MASSAGE

Massaging for the alleviation of Prostate Trouble is as old as time, and some of the most outstanding authorities in the medical profession recommend massage as a safe effective treatment. (See Reference Book of the Medical Science, [Vol. VII], 3rd Edition).

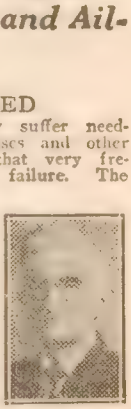
USE "PROSAGER"

—A new invention which enables any man to massage his Prostate Gland in the privacy of his home. It often brings relief with the first treatment and must help or it costs you nothing. No Drugs or Electricity.

THOUSANDS AFFLICTED

Thousands of men in every community suffer neednessly it is said from ailments, weaknesses and other physical shortcomings without knowing that very frequently they are caused by prostatic failure. The Prostate Gland though small is most important, when inflamed, enlarged or otherwise deranged, the result is most generally apparent in other vital organs which are also situated in the pelvis of man. Because the effects of a disordered Prostate Gland are responsible for so many varied ailments, the percentage of men past middle life that are troubled with these ailments is so high that it is impossible to estimate.

Many younger men suffer from conditions similar to that of sciatica, backache and perineal aches due to prostate ailing.



DR. W. D. SMITH
INVENTOR

UNSOLICITED LETTERS OF GRATITUDE

The following are extracts from letters received, which are on file in our office; the complete letters and addresses will be sent to anyone who is interested in inquiring for them.

Mr. B. A. Williams, Columbus, Ohio, writes in regard to the Prosager: "I am thoroughly satisfied with it and wish to say that if I could not get another, I would not take a thousand dollars for the one I have—if you desire at any time you can use my name in any way in any exploiting you might want to do with your product."

Mr. Wm. F. Lemon, San Francisco, California, states in his letter: "After using the Prosager I am well again and feel none of the symptoms of Prostate trouble." Mr. Wm. F. Lee, Washington, D. C., writes: "The Prosager is mild; I would not be without it."

Mr. Henry Zitman, Auburn, Indiana, says: "I will say this much for the Prosager, it has saved me from an operation. The Doctor that treated me before I got it says it is a fine thing to use. If there is anyone in this territory that wants to know about it, direct them to me." Mr. Judson Trefethan, New Castle, N. H., writes about the Prosager: "I think it is a great invention, my Doctor came to see it and he said it was a good invention."

Each month we receive scores of unsolicited letters of gratitude and appreciation from users of the Prosager—having thousands of users we no doubt can refer Prostate Sufferers to someone in their own home town who are enthusiastic in their praise of the remarkable benefits received.

"You're as young as you feel—And the PROSAGER helps you to feel Young"

WHY NOT KEEP VIGOROUS? The Prostate Gland must be in a normal condition to perform the necessary function for which it was intended. You will enjoy life in fuller measure if your Prostate Gland is healthy. The "PROSAGER" massages the Prostate Gland, assisting nature to restore normal action.

FREE BOOKLET Explains Vital Details and Our TRIAL OFFER

Send at once for this free booklet containing startling and vital information of the cause of Prostate Trouble, that no doubt you have long wished to know.

A one cent post card with name and address plainly written is all that is necessary. Address card to

MIDWEST PRODUCTS CO., B-700, Kalamazoo, Mich.

tures is a lot bigger an' th' stock as is on open range is a lot wilder. But them coots is cunnin' an' are over t' Cottonwood right now a spearin' around an' a plannin' how t' work th' game on us. I knows, count th' mess as Muley Johnson got inta like I tolt yo' about, an' cause I got a spy planted on 'em.

Yeah, I've sent Hopeful Hankins t' loaf around town. He's sech a natural damn fool nobody would expect him t' be s' danged smart. He's jes' th' kint o' a nit-wit as them rackateer-rustlers will loop onta t' pump. Wot's more, I've instructed Hopeful it cough up his guts, when they tanks him up, an' tell 'em jes' whar at t' find th' best steers an' how t' git 'em loaded. Then, with yo' fellers help, we'll put th' bee on some o' them buggers 'er I'm a Siwash. I'll leave you in on th' deal in plenty o' time, but you can be kinda gittin' yore six-shooters iled up. Right now I wants t' say a few worts about suthin' I wisht I didn't has t' say, 'cause it makes me feel mighty bad to even think about it.

I means about Will Rogers. Now me, I thought Will the greatest man in th' WORLD. He was one o' th mighty few as insisted on bein' *natcheral* an' *wholesome*. Will stuck out, BIG, 'cause he jes' stuck t' bein' Will Rogers. Cripes, some folks called him "a actor," thet ain't so—*it war everybody else as war doin' th'* ACTIN'—thet's wot made Wills' different.

Yo' couldn't bog Will down in no artificial, synthetic, make-believe bushawa—No sir! *He was too smart t' git tangled in thet loop!* Him, *jes' bein' hissef*, made him a FREAK, sorta. He wasn't one person t' one person an' somebody elst t' some other purson. He war Will Rogers ALL TH' TIME t' everybody. Even when he war a actin' a part in a play he want actin' *a part*. He jes' fitted HISSELF inta th' play, refusin' t' act in a play as he hadda ACT in.

When Will writ a piece, he didn't play he war A AUTHOR, HELL NO! He war still Will. An he could shore see through a hole in a grind-stone, and *knowed it war a hole* in a grind-stone as he war a lookin' through. Wot he saw war wot WAS THAR *TO* SEE. Most folks seems t' imagine as wot they see is suthin' else—suthin' as mebbe they WANT T' SEE, but wot ain't really thar. Most o' us goes through life kiddin' oursefs—Will didn't, an' so every-body thought Will was *funny*, an' wot he said was funny.

I reckon they be right about thet; *Maybe it is funny* t' be natcheral an' tell th' truth. *Mebbe it is funny* t' see things like they really be. Some times I thinks we'd *all* be a lot better of iff'n we all war FUNNY THET WAY. I hated t' see Will have t' go —seemed t' me like he set such a good example to th' rest o' us. *Why he even made a lot o' money bein' decent.*

Will had th' *nicest way* o' lookin' at things an' people an' tellin' t' truth about 'em. His "wise cracks" war real wise cracks, as a rule—not jes' gags. I never hern tell o' Will pullin' a ornary trick in his life, and he got great an' prosperonous doin' good. Most o' us imagines we've got t' horn everybody elset t' git along, but somehow we don't has much luck at it. Mebbe, atter all, *it's us as is funny*, an' thet Will wasn't.

I don't know wot kinda religion Will had, iff'n any, an' I don't care. Iff'n I ever gits t' Th' Happy Huntin' Grounds I'll shore expect t' run onta Will thar, iff'n he AIN'T, then I'm gonna hunt around ontil I finds whar he's at—wharever it is, it'll be plumb

good enough fer ME. Yeah, thet's th' way I feels about Will an' th' place he took his last sky-ride to. I ain't astin' nobody else t' agree with me.

Now I'm gonna try t' speak t' Will:

So long, Will, I hopes t' be a seein' yo' some time!

I don't feel like talkin' no more about Will an' Will's an' my WEST—I'm sorrta choked up.—When I think about Will, I can't help thinkin', too, about th' hundreds o' other fine cow hands I've known. I'm afeared their breed is a diein' out, *but I hopes not.* I hopes every one o' you will try t' be as squar a shooter as was Will—thet's all.

Th' Pen Pal Corral

Now yere's a letter from one o' our ol' *real* cow-hand pards, Ol' Zanny hissef:

Pleasant Valley, Iowa.

Howdy Coteau Gene:

How be yuh? The last time I wrote you a few lines I was a very sick guy and near died. I couldn't leave the house for 3 month. (Zanny got hurt an' sick one time, some years back, jes' as he war enterin' a Rodeo Contest over Black Hills way, he's never gotten clean over it—hope he will!) Sometime after that I began to get better and have done considerable work, considerin'.

I have moved, as you will note. I sold my Mex. saddle and whole outfit to a Texas Ranger. I got me another saddle, though, from Mexico again. I like it pretty well, but haven't had time to get *it and me* adjusted. My new bit and spurs haven't got here yet, though I've had the saddle for two months.

My new saddle has black tie strings and black edging; 6¼ inch horn, the flat style. I've been trying to get a new pair of riding boots I like—just got a pair from an outfit in Texas, made to order and measure—never was so disappointed in my life, I'm firing them right back.

Saw Mix's Circus the other day in Davenport, Iowa.

Say Gene, did you ever get that knife-throwing book from the advertisement I sent you? I sent for one and have been looking for it for months. He wrote last fall

"I have REDUCED MY WAIST 8 INCHES WITH THE WEIL BELT"

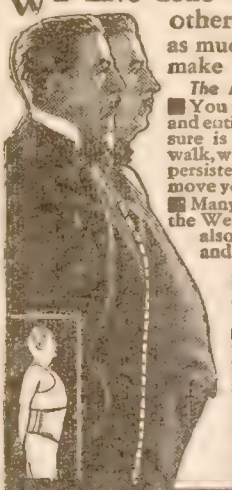
... writes George Bailey

"I suddenly realized that I had become a fat man". The boys kidded me about my big "paunch".
At parties I learned that I had become a "wall flower". Nobody wanted to dance with me.
In a bathing suit ... I was immense. The day I heard some children laugh at me I decided to get a Weil Belt.
What a change! I looked 3 inches slimmer at once and soon I had actually taken EIGHT INCHES off my waist ... and 20 pounds off my weight!
It seemed to support the abdominal walls and keep the digestive organs in place ... and best of all, I became acceptable for insurance!
I have a new feeling of energy and pep ... work better, eat better, play better ... I didn't realize how much I was missing!

REDUCE YOUR WAIST THREE INCHES IN TEN DAYS

... or it won't cost you a penny!

WE have done this for thousands of others...*we know* we can do as much for you...that's why we make this unconditional offer!



The Massage-Like Action Does It

■ You will be completely comfortable and entirely unaware that its gentle pressure is working constantly while you walk, work or sit...its massage-like action persistently eliminating fat with every move you make!

■ Many enthusiastic wearers write that the Weil Belt not only reduces fat but it also supports the abdominal walls and keeps the digestive organs in place...that they are no longer fatigued...and that it greatly increases their endurance and vigor!

Improves Your Appearance

■ The Weil Reducing Belt will make you appear many inches slimmer at once, and in 10 short days your waistline will actually be 3 inches smaller... 3 inches of fat gone...or it won't cost you one cent!

Don't Wait. Fat Is Dangerous

■ Insurance companies know the danger of fat accumulations. The best medical authorities warn against obesity. Don't wait any longer act today!

SEND FOR 10 DAY FREE TRIAL OFFER

THE WEIL COMPANY, Inc. 8112 Hill St., New Haven, Conn.

Gentlemen: Send me FREE, your illustrated folder describing The Weil Belt and full details of your 10 Day FREE Trial Offer.

Name_____

Address_____

Use Coupon or Send Name and Address on Penny Post Card

that this spring he was going to put out a new edition, but so far I've not heard from him and I'm wondering about it.

How you feelin' of late? I'm not so good, my legs swell quite a bit. I'm trying various things for them, even drinking chestnut tea. I was planning to get out West again, but things have been going hay-wire. I wanted to be at Cheyenne for the celebration. How's the writin' biz? Oh yes, I got a letter from old Pink Simms about two weeks ago.

There was a pretty fair, Mex. knife-thrower in Mix's Circus, short range though. Also did you get the low-down on that "Wiz." knife-thrower in Mo., the one you sent me the letter from? Well I guess I'll ring off,

Your friend,
E. ZANTOW ("*Zanny*").

Thar yo' be—A letter from one ol' busted down cow-hand to another. I thought mebbe yo'd like to see how we ol' pelicans write t' one another. I'll answer th' billy-doo right here, partly.

Zanny, Yo' ol' horned-toad:

Seems like yo're feelin' SWELL even when yo' *ain't* feelin' swell—I'd call thet HELL. Me, I'm feelin' about th' same way—I blames my trouble on early PIUTEY. Naw, I DON'T mean piety er pie-eaty.

Yeah I read thet adwertisement about how Mex. saddles war good fer Diabetis—I reckon thet's how come yo' stick to 'em. but a half-breed bull is good enough fer ME.

Say, iff'n yo' can't git a pair o' boots in Texas, *as is big enough*, why don'tcha plant a pair in Boot Hill an' leave 'em grow?

Now me—I gits my hats from Cape *Hat*aras; my vests from *Vest* Virginia, my coats from Connecti*coat*, my shoes from *Shoe*rusalem, my pants from *Pants*ylvania—No! I don't want none o' yore *socks!*

I didn't fall fer thet adwertisement o' a throwin'-knife book. I writ one m'sef an' sold it t' Ace High Magazine an' they printed it last October.

Thet throwin-knife "Wiz." He said he war s' good, I offered t' travel with him along a cross-eyed coyote an' a stinkless skunk we got out yere on th' Flyin' Horss-shoe, but he turnt out like a lot o' glof an' Contract Bridge players—he TALKED a danged good game, but he couldn't throw a knife A TALL—but he war hell on throwin' th' bull. Von Lengerke & Antoine, a big sport goods outfit in th' Chicago loop, 33 S. Wabash Ave, have a few o' my knives on display now, an' I'm makin' a mess fer them t' take down t' their New York City stores.

Made a gun-harness fer "Doc" Hickock, cousin' o' "Wild Bill," "Doct's" ranchin over by Lakin, Kansas. He writ back: "You BET! NEVER SAW ITS EQUAL!"

Say, I calls THET a complement, a comin' from th' Hickock outfit. But I claims as nay coot wot ain't been foundered in his fore-quarters can Go for, draw an point a gun from thet rig in ½ second er less without practisin' over ten minutes—if he's fair fast, he can do it in a QUARTER. No use a tryin' t' TELL anybody this though—it shore like most gun-slinger would ruther practise forty years from a durn awkward o' soger-harness than for forty minutes with a harness *designed* fer fast work. An' I shore don't give a cuss if they do.

Wa'al when yo' gits yo' some boots as will fit yore corns an' bunions, come on up t' th' Flyin' Hoss-shoe an' help me stave off th' rustlers.

Cheer up, s' long as them swellins don't git inta yore head I reckon yo'll be O. K.

Your'n,
GENE.

Yeah, we ol' rannies allus writers gentle, cheerin' billy-doos t' each other. One time I write one t' ol' Apache Joe Turner who war holed up in a horspital in K. C. with a bust leg. I sent it care o' his nuss. *She thought it war fer her*, an write me back *thet she would.* She sent her pitcher along, I took one look an' rode over inta Canada thet night. From thar, I wired: "Like HELL yo' will."

Section 5, Rural Delivery,
Otahuti, Southland, New Zealand.

Dear sir:

I have just finished reading a late number of your wonderful magazine and think it a great exciter. "Six Gun Law" was a great yarn. Could you get me some Pen Pals? I live in a province where ther is wonderful scenery, mountains and lakes, bush and large rivers. I have some fine snapshots and would exchange with any Pen Pal, any sex.

I am 22 years of age, 5 ft. 11 in. high, weigh 11 stone, dark. A keen racing cyclist and footballer. Southland is at the lower end of New Zealand, Commander Byrd passed quite close on going and coming from the South Pole. He left from Dunedin, Otago, which is about 140 miles north from here.

Be Your Own MUSIC Teacher

LEARN AT HOME

to play by *note*, Piano, Violin, Ukulele, Tenor Banjo, Hawaiian Guitar, Piano Accordion, Saxophone, Clarinet or any other instrument. Wonderful improved method. Simple as A B C. No "numbers" or trick music. Cost averages only a few cents a day. Over 700,000 students.

FREE BOOK Write today for Free Booklet and Free Demonstration Lesson explaining this method in detail. Tell what your favorite instrument is and write name and address plainly.
U. S. SCHOOL OF MUSIC, 36912 Brunswick Bldg., New York City, N. Y.

Kidneys Must Clean Out Acids

The only way your body can clean out Acids and poisonous wastes from your blood is thru 9 million tiny, delicate Kidney tubes or filters, but beware of cheap, drastic, irritating drugs. If functional Kidney or Bladder disorders make you suffer from Getting Up Nights, Nervousness, Leg Pains, Backache, Circles Under Eyes, Dizziness, Rheumatic Pains, Acidity, Burning, Smarting or Itching, don't take chances. Get the Doctor's guaranteed prescription called Cystex (Siss-Tex). Works fast, safe and sure. In 48 hours it must bring new vitality, and is guaranteed to do the work in one week or money back on return of empty package. Cystex costs only 3c a dose at druggists and the guarantee protects you.

QUIT WHISKEY

The Health Remedy Products of Kansas City is now offering a NEW scientifically prepared treatment to aid men and wo-
FREE men banish all desire for drinking. Thousands have already proved success of this New Easy Way. Can be given secretly. Write today for Free Booklet. Accept no substitutes. Write **Health Remedy Products, 2489 Manufacturers Exchange Bldg., Kansas City, Mo.**

Do you want to be a GOOD BOXER?

Complete boxing course quickly teaches professional blows and guards—Dempsey Triple, Fitzsimmons Shift, etc.—all illustrated in 226 pages, 159 photos. Big course also includes wrestling, jiu-jitsu, self-defense. All for only $2.97, 10-day money-back guarantee. FREE if you order complete course now!—64 page Physical Culture course and Ring History and photos of 69 famous prize fighters. Act quick. Send today! C. O. D. or send cash with order. MARSHALL STILLMAN ASS'N, Dept. D-12, 220 E. 42nd St., New York.

BECOME A SUCCESSFUL

DETECTIVE

Earn Big Money—Travel or Work at Home—Experience Unnecessary. Train Yourself for Secret Investigation and Confidential Work. FREE Detective Paper and Particulars. Write Today to

NATIONAL DETECTIVE SYSTEM
Dept. 425-F **Fremont, Nebraska, U. S. A.**

LAW

STUDY AT HOME

Legally trained men win high positions and big success in business and public life. Be independent. Greater opportunities now than ever before. Big corporations are headed by men with legal training. Earn **$3,000 to $10,000 Annually**

We guide you step by step. You can train at home during spare time. Degree of LL. B. conferred. Successful graduates in every section of the United States. We furnish all text material, including fourteen-volume Law Library. Low cost, easy terms. Get our valuable 64 page "Law Training for Leadership" and "Evidence" books FREE. Send for them NOW.
LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 1275-L, Chicago

I'll PROVE in Only 7 Days *that I Can Make* YOU a New Man!

No other Physical Instructor in the World has ever DARED to make such an Offer.

By CHARLES ATLAS
Holder of the Title:
"The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man"

I HAVE proved to thousands that my system of building powerful, big-muscled men begins to show results *in only 7 days*—and I can prove it to *you*.

Don't take *my* word. Don't take the word of my hundreds of pupils who have added inches to chest, biceps, neck, thighs, calves in only a few days. Prove for *yourself*—in just one week—by the change in *your own body*—that you can become a NEW MAN—a real "Atlas Champion."

Where do *you* want big, powerful muscles? How many pounds of firm flesh do *you* want to fill you out? Where do *you* lack vitality, pep, robust health? Where do *you* want to take off flabby, surplus fat?

Give me a week, I'll show you that I can make a *New Man* of you, give you power and drive, put you in that magnificent condition which wins you the envy of any man, the admiration of every woman.

NO "APPARATUS" NEEDED

You begin to FEEL and SEE the difference at once, without using any tricky weights, pulleys, pills, "rays," or unnatural dieting. My *Dynamic Tension* is a natural method of developing you *inside and out*. It also goes after constipation, pimples, skin blotches, and other conditions that keep you from enjoying life.

THIS STERLING SILVER CUP BEING GIVEN AWAY

This valuable cup stands about 14 ins. high on a black mahogany base.

I will award it to my pupil who makes the most improvement in his development within the next three months.

LET ME TELL YOU HOW

Gamble a stamp today. Mail coupon for my free book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."* It shows you, from actual photos, how I have developed my pupils to the same perfectly balanced proportions of my own physique by my secret methods.

FREE BOOK

Where shall I send your copy of "Everlasting Health and Strength"? Write your name and address on coupon, and mail it today. Your own new "Atlas body" is waiting for you. This book tells you how easy it is to get my way. Send coupon to me personally.

CHARLES ATLAS
Dept. 912
115 E. 23rd St. New York, N.Y.

CHARLES ATLAS
Dept. 912, 115 E. 23rd St., NEW YORK, N. Y.

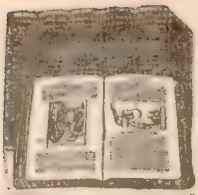
I want the proof that your system of *Dynamic Tension* will make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscle development. Send me your free book, *"Everlasting Health and Strength."*

Name.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City..... State.....

© 1935, C. A. Ltd.



AUTO

BOOKS SENT FREE

on approval. Just mail the coupon and we'll send you a set of these remarkable auto books, just off the press. Whether you are a mechanic or helper, expert or apprentice, auto owner or driver, if you're interested in knowing all about automobile mechanics, then take advantage of this FREE OFFER.

Over 300 pages on DIESEL Engines

A better job—in the gigantic auto industry. BIGGER PAY—a chance to go into business for yourself and get a share of the huge profits are waiting for any man who even half tries to improve himself. Learn auto engineering with these wonder books a new way—without studying or memorizing. Simply use the JIFFY INDEX to look up the answer to any auto problem. Built by eleven of America's greatest automobile engineers, and written in simple language so you can understand it. Very newest cars, all covered.

CAN YOU FIX IT?

These wonder books tell step by step HOW to take out "play" in differential—skill the dummy in shooting to set TIMING—how to put your finger instantly on engine trouble and then the quick expert way to FIX it. Newest improvements fully covered. Equal to a complete trade course at less than a fourth the cost.

6 Big Volumes 1935 Edition

2500 pages, 2000 illustrations, wiring diagrams, etc., including Marine Engines, Aviation Motors, Diesel Engines, etc. De Luxe edition, gold-stamped flexible binding.

FREE! Privilege of consulting Automobile Engineers of American Technical Society for one year without cost if you mail coupon immediately.

AMERICAN TECHNICAL SOCIETY
Drexel Avenue & 58th St., Dept. A9146, Chicago, Ill.

AMERICAN TECHNICAL SOCIETY,
Drexel Ave. & 58th St., Dept. A9146, Chicago, Ill.
I would like to see the new 6-volume edition of your AUTO BOOKS. I will pay the few cents delivery charges only, but if I choose to, I may return them express collect. If after 10 days use I prefer to keep them, I will send you $2 and pay the balance at the rate of only $3 a month, until $24.80 is paid. Please include free consulting membership as per your offer above. Send brand new 1935 edition.

Name .....

Address .....

City ..... State .....
Attach letter stating age, occupation and name and address of employer and at least one business man as reference

BECOME AN EXPERT

ACCOUNTANT

Executive Accountants and C. P. A.'s earn $3,000 to $15,000 a year. Thousands of firms need them. Only 12,000 Certified Public Accountants. The U. S. We train you thoroughly at home in spare time for C.P.A. exams or executive accounting positions. Previous experience unnecessary. Personal training under supervision of staff of C.P.A.'s, including members of the American Institute of Accountants. Write for free book, "Accountancy, the Profession that Pays."

LaSalle Extension University, Dept. 1215-H, Chicago
The School That Has Trained Over 1,200 C. P. A.'s

WHISKEY HABIT HELP HIM QUIT

Send for FREE Trial of Noxalco, a guaranteed harmless home treatment. Can be given secretly in food or drink to anyone who drinks or craves Gin, Whiskey, Home Brew, Wine, Moonshine, etc. Your request for Free Trial brings a trial supply by return mail and full $2.00 treatment which you may try under a 30 day refund guarantee. Try Noxalco at our risk. ARLEE CO. Dept. H-12, BALTIMORE, MD.

MAKE $18.00 WEEKLY at HOME

MAKE $18.00 WEEKLY AT HOME, ADDRESSING AND MAILING POST CARDS AND LETTERS. Experience unnecessary. Steady work. Supply furnished. START NOW. Complete particulars send 10c.

NATIONAL INDUSTRIES
17 Locust. Dept. 25. Springfield, Mass.

HAVE YOU AN INVENTION?

Want to know how to develop them? A novel invention may produce something saleable. Secure patent protection. Write today for FREE Book "Patent Guide for the Inventor." It illustrates scores of inventions, many of them the foundation of commercial success.

CLARENCE A. O'BRIEN and HYMAN BERMAN, Registered Patent Attorneys, 1875 Adams Bldg., Washington, D. C.

Hoping to get some letters from some Pen Pals, I promise faithfully to answer all letters I receive.

Yours truly,

GORDON C. GRIEVE.

Wa'al I got kinda closet t' yo' Gord., by proxy. One, anyhow, o' my knives war on board with Byrd—one o' my big uns I use t' call "Th' Explorer," but wot has been re-christened "The Tarzan." I hope it want IT as made Byrd sick, th' price WAR purty high, but it took me durned nigh a week t' make it an' th' sheath.

Dartmouth P.O.
Halifax Co., Nova Scotia, Canada.

Dear Coteau:

Well I have been reading your Wild West Stories for three years, I should know what I'm talking about and this I can say: it's the best and most interesting book I ever read. And now, how about some Pen Pals for a lonely "sweet sixteener," for that's what I am. I am 5 ft. 4 in., have dark brown eyes and hair. I would particularly like to correspond with cowboys and cowgals. So how about it Pals, will you fill my letter box?

I promise faithfully to write and exchange snapshots. I live on a farm a few miles from Dartmouth on the edge of a lake in which I go swimming in summer and skate on in winter. So Au Revoir for this time, and remember I'm waiting for a team-mate.

Yours hopefully,

MISS DOROTHY CONROD.

Take yore pick o' th' herd, Dot, an' iff'n yo' can't gentle 'm alone I'll help yuh. I thought yo' said yo' live by a LAKE, now yo' says "au revoir."

NO sir! We don't need t' have *no* trouble in this country iff'n yo' folks will jes' leave it all t' ME. Hell, wot's th' use o' me a havin' a head onless yo' folks makes use it? Why, Will Rogers once said t' me: "Coteau, if everybody had heads like yours we wouldn't need a single Insane asylum in this country."

Your'n,

"COTEAU GENE,"
Still the Foreman.

Do YOU Want This Issue's Original Cover Painting?

◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆

HOW would you like to have the original painting of the cover of this issue's **Wild West Stories and Complete Novel Magazine?**

Well, it is yours for the asking!

This month's cover painting was made by one of America's foremost cover artists—Mr. Rafael De Soto, who is a genuis in handling color. You can see that for yourself by merely glancing at the reproduction on the cover. The story it tells is dramatic and full of life. A girl finds her lover tied up in the wilderness and is about to release him when, suddenly, he cries out a warning to her. From the corner of her eyes she sees the unscrupulous bandit who thinks nothing of throwing a knife into her back. She has to move swiftly—and does. Out comes her gun—and she is ready. Naturally, she wins. With her courage and resourcefulness she could do no less.

It would look well, too, from above your fireplace, or in your den, or on the walls of your living-room or foyer. And — it won't cost you a penny. Sorry, I'm wrong — it will only cost you the price of a postage stamp. Not more than three cents!

Here is what you have to do:

Write a letter of not more than a hundred words telling why you want the cover painting. That's all. Tell me why and the letter giving the most interesting reply will be awarded the original painting. Easy, isn't it? There is nothing to buy or sell, no complicated rules to get you mixed up—nothing to do but write a short letter telling me why you want the picture.

There is no lettering on this painting — it is ready for hanging — but not with a noose. Remember — not more than a hundred words and all replies must be in by not later than November 25th, 1935. Results will be announced in the February issue, on sale December 20th.

Come on you fellows and girls! Get out the old pen and ink. Send your replies direct to the editor,

FREDERICK GARDENER

WILD WEST STORIES AND COMPLETE NOVEL MAGAZINE

461 EIGHTH AVENUE, NEW YORK

WE CAN TEACH YOU TO MOUNT BIRDS

GEE, BILL, THIS SQUIRREL ACTUALLY LOOKS ALIVE. ALL THE FELLOWS THINK YOUR DEN IS GREAT.
IT'S EASY, FRED, ONCE YOU GET THE HANG OF IT. I LEARNED BY MAIL IN MY SPARE TIME. TAXIDERMY IS THE GRANDEST HOBBY IN THE WORLD — AND PROFITABLE, TOO. IN FACT, THIS OWL BOOK-END IS FOR A CUSTOMER.
FRED, WHY DON'T YOU WRITE TO THE NORTHWESTERN SCHOOL FOR THEIR FREE BOOK?

FUN - FASCINATION - PROFIT

Be A Taxidermist. New Profitable business. Learn quickly at home, to MOUNT life-like **Birds, Animals, Game-Heads, Fish.** Save your valuable trophies. Decorate your home and den. Learn genuine Chrome Tanning for harness and sole leather, buckskin and fine furs. Mount **Common** specimens, squirrels, rabbits, owls, even frogs, into marvelous craft-work groups, both useful and humorous. **Wild-game not necessary.**

BIG PROFITS Turn your spare time to cash. Have a skilled profitable business. Mount game trophies for sportsmen; sell your own mounts; save money and **Make Money** with expert tanning. Learn *by mail* from old reliable school, with 200,000 graduates. **Investigate Today.**

FREE BOOK 48 pages, very interesting, 100 beautiful GAME PICTURES. Tells how YOU can become a taxidermist. Absolutely **FREE** if you send **at once.** Write for YOUR copy TODAY—THIS MINUTE. State your AGE.

N. W. School of Taxidermy, 3039 Elwood Bldg, Omaha, Neb.

Home-Study
Business Training

Your opportunity will never be bigger than your preparation. Prepare now and reap the rewards of early success. **Free 64-Page Books Tell How.** Write NOW for book you want, or mail coupon with your name, present position and address in margin today.

- ☐ Higher Accountancy
- ☐ Mod. Salesmanship
- ☐ Traffic Management
- ☐ Rail. Station Mgm't
- ☐ Law: Degree of LL.B.
- ☐ Commercial Law
- ☐ Industrial Mgm't
- ☐ Banking and Finance
- ☐ Business Mgm't
- ☐ Paper Salesman's Training
- ☐ Business Corres.
- ☐ Credit and Collection Correspondence
- ☐ Modern Foremanship
- ☐ Personnel Mgm't
- ☐ Expert Bookkeeping
- ☐ C. P. A. Coaching
- ☐ Business English
- ☐ Effective Speaking
- ☐ Stenotypy

LA SALLE EXTENSION UNIVERSITY
Dept. 1275-R **Chicago**

WE MATCH PANTS To Any Suit!

Double the life of your coat and vest with correctly matched pants. 100,000 patterns. Every pair hand tailored to your measure. Our match sent **FREE** for your O. K. before pants are made. Fit guaranteed. **Send piece of cloth or vest today.**

SUPERIOR MATCH PANTS COMPANY
209 S. State St. Dept. 289 Chicago

LOOK! MAGIC CASE

HANDS YOU A LIGHTED Cigarette

Take a beautifully enameled Case from your vest pocket. Press a magic button! Automatically there is a spark — a flame. A LIGHTED Cigarette — your favorite brand — is delivered to your lips. You PUFF and SMOKE. A revolutionary invention . . . guaranteed . . . amazingly low priced. Get a Magic Case for 15 Days' Trial at our risk. **AGENTS!** Get facts about Big Profits. **MAGIC CASE MFRS., 4234 Cozens Ave., Dept. W-660, St. Louis, Mo.**

Brand New TYPEWRITER PORTABLES NOW ONLY $17.95 & UP

10¢ a Day · Easy Terms

Sensational Low Prices and easy terms on limited supply only. All brand new, up-to-date 4-row keyboard. **Fully Guaranteed.**

SEND NO MONEY — 10 Day Trial

Send for special new literature and money-saving, easy pay plan with 10 day trial offer. Also amazing bargains in standard size, rebuilt office models on FREE trial offer.

International Typewriter Exch., 231 W. Monroe St., Dept. 1292, Chicago

High School Course in 2 to 4 Years

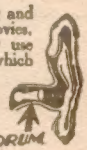
You can complete your High School education at home—in 2 to 4 years. Course prepares for college entrance examinations, and advancement in business and industry. Standard H. S. texts supplied. Diploma awarded. Credit for H. S. subjects already completed.

Liberal Arts Course Offers cultural advantages of college training at low cost, by home study. Uses standard texts, supplemented by special instruction and lectures. A real opportunity to H. S. graduates and young older people. Free Bulletin. State which course interests you.

American School, Dept. H-938, Drexel at 58th, Chicago

DEAFNESS IS MISERY

Many people with defective hearing and Head Noises enjoy Conversation, Movies, Church and Radio, because they use Leonard Invisible Ear Drums which resemble Tiny Megaphones fitting In the Ear entirely out of sight. No wires, batteries or head piece. They are inexpensive. Write for booklet and sworn statement of the inventor who was himself deaf.



A. O. LEONARD, Inc., Suite 23, 70 5th Ave., New York

QUIT TOBACCO

The Health Remedy Products of Kansas City is now offering a NEW scientifically prepared treatment to aid men and women banish quickly all desire for smoking, chewing or snuff.

FREE Thousands have already proved success of this New Easy Way. Write today for Free Booklet. Accept no substitutes. Write **Health Remedy Products, Dept. 579 Manufacturers Exch. Bldg., Kansas City, Mo.**

BIG MONEY SELLING SHIRTS

AGENTS WANTED to represent old-established firm and take orders. Make Big Money every day selling Dress Shirts, Work Shirts, Flannel Shirts, Neckwear, Underwear, Dresses, Hosiery, Smocks, Pajamas, Suede Jackets, Sweaters, Melton Jackets, Pants, Play Suits, Overalls, Coveralls, Raincoats, Men's Suits, Shoes, Belts, Uniforms. Everything Guaranteed. Experience unnecessary. Write quick.

NIMROD CO., Dept. 75, 4922-28 Lincoln Ave. Chicago, Ill.

GOV'T. JOBS

SALARY TO START $90 to $175 MONTHLY

MEN.. WOMEN

Age Range 18 to 50

- ( ) Ry. Mail Clerk
- ( ) P. O. Laborer
- ( ) R. F. D. Carrier
- ( ) Special Agent
- ( ) Customs Inspector
- ( ) City Mail Carrier
- ( ) P. O. Clerk
- ( ) Matron
- ( ) Special Investigator
- ( ) Typist
- ( ) POSTMASTER
- ( ) Seamstress
- ( ) Auditor
- ( ) Stenographer
- ( ) U.S. Border Patrol
- ( ) Telephone Oper.
- ( ) Watchman
- ( ) Meat Inspector
- ( ) Secret Service Op.
- ( ) File Clerk

INSTRUCTION BUREAU, Dept. 112, St. Louis, Mo.

Send me FREE particulars "How to Qualify for Government Positions" marked "X". Salaries, locations, opportunities, etc. ALL SENT FREE.

Name.....

Address.....

AND JUST WHEN I'VE MET THE SWELLEST GIRL

A new crop of pimples was always taking the joy out of things!

WHAT'S WRONG, TED? YOU LOOK ALL WASHED UP!
DON'T I KNOW IT! I **WOULD** HAVE TO GET A FLOCK OF CHIN BLOSSOMS JUST WHEN I WANT TO MAKE A GOOD IMPRESSION ON SALLY

IF THAT'S ALL—CHEER UP! I MEANT TO TELL YOU SIS SAID TO TRY FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST — 3 CAKES A DAY, AND PIMPLES VAMOOSE
HONESTLY? THEN IT'S FLEISCHMANN'S YEAST FOR ME—IN A HURRY

2 WEEKS LATER
HELLO, TED— WHERE HAVE **YOU** BEEN THESE PAST TWO WEEKS?
OH, JUST OUT LOOKING TO MAKE SURE THERE WERE NO GIRLS AS PRETTY AS YOU—AND THERE AREN'T!

Don't let adolescent pimples spoil any of YOUR dates!

From about 13 to 25 years of age, important glands develop, causing disturbances throughout the body. Waste poisons enter the blood. These irritate the skin, cause pimples. Doctors prescribe Fleischmann's Yeast for adolescent pimples. It clears skin irritants out of the blood, pimples disappear. Eat 3 cakes a day until the skin clears.

. .936, Standard Brands Incorporated

—clears the skin

by clearing skin irritants out of the blood

FAMOUS AVIATORS TELL WHY CAMELS ARE MILDER

Lieutenant Commander Frank Hawks, U. S. N. R. (*left*), holder of 214 speed records and the Harmon Trophy, comments: "As the athletes say, Camels are so mild they don't get the wind. And I've found they never upset my nerves. Camel must use choicer tobaccos."

"Camels don't get your Wind" Athletes say

"I smoke Camels all I want," says Colonel Roscoe Turner (*right*). "I enjoy Camels more. Because of their mildness they never tire my taste. And after smoking a Camel, I get a 'refill' in energy—a new feeling of vim and well-being."

"Get a Lift with a Camel"

"Camels refresh me so when I'm fatigued," says Sir Charles Kingsford-Smith (*above*), who made the record-breaking transpacific flight. "And they are so mild that I can smoke any number of Camels without throwing my nerves off key."

"They Never Tire Your Taste"

YOU'LL FIND THAT CAMELS ARE MILD, TOO—BETTER FOR STEADY SMOKING
CAMEL
TURKISH & DOMESTIC BLEND CIGARETTES
CHOICE CIGARETTES

© 1935 R. J. Reynolds Tob. Co.

COSTLIER TOBACCOS!

● Camels are made from finer, MORE EXPENSIVE TOBACCOS—Turkish and Domestic—than any other popular brand.

(*Signed*) R. J. REYNOLDS TOBACCO COMPANY
Winston-Salem, N. C.